

Chapter 12

Social Media for Civic Engagement: An Exploration of Urban Governments

Thomas A. Bryer
University of Central Florida, USA

Kimberly L. Nelson
Northern Illinois University, USA

ABSTRACT

To explore the relationship between form of municipal government and deployment of social media tools for civic engagement, the authors conduct an analysis of a random set of purposively selected cities for content analysis of their social media tools. The authors use the seven forms of government identified by Nelson and Svara (2012) as the basis by which to select the sample cities. Across forms of government, there is no apparent pattern on deployment of social media tools for civic engagement. Municipalities of every form are using the tools, primarily Facebook and Twitter, and most, regardless of form, are not using the tools in a social manner. This finding is consistent with previous work by the authors and others. Important areas for future research are identified in a closing discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement is defined as “people participating together for deliberative and collective action within an array of interests, institutions and networks, developing civic identity and involving people in the governance processes” (Cooper, 2005). In practice, however, civic engagement has

taken many forms with variable costs, and there have been ambiguous and uncertain outcomes. Designing, implementing, and facilitating “effective” participation processes is as much art as science, and as much culture/context-dependent as driven by universal values concerning citizen rights and opportunities in democratically-oriented societies. Despite these ambiguities, there is a strong chorus within academia advocating through theoretical and empirical research for the development of institutions to enhance civic engagement processes;

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4169-3.ch012

of course, there are critics as well as pragmatists equally active in the scholarly dialogues. This is perhaps no more true than within the sub-field of technology-facilitated civic engagement (e.g. e-government, social media, and social networks).

Civic engagement in urban governance has been a particularly attractive topic over the past forty years, with some interruption during the 1980s (Cooper, 2005). One instrumental writer early on was George Frederickson, who authored or edited two books: *Power, Public Opinion, and Policy in a Metropolitan Community* with Linda Schluter O'Leary, and *Neighborhood Control in the 1970s: Politics, Administration, and Citizen Participation*. These texts established a context and broad philosophical direction for the emerging interest in citizenship and civic engagement in urban communities. Preceding these writings was a work by Milton Kotler (1969), *Neighborhood Government: The Local Foundations of Public Life*, in which he argued for giving control over certain elements of public goods and common pool funding to neighborhood residents. Terry Cooper has written often about the history of civic enterprises, dating to the work of community organizer Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation. Alinsky worked to mobilize and empower citizens in neighborhoods, though in a more adversarial way than what Kotler suggested. Neighborhood-based governance took on more formal characteristics with the development of neighborhood councils in cities ranging from Minneapolis, MN (Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993), to Los Angeles (Musso, Weare, Bryer, & Cooper, 2011).

The balance of this introductory section provides a brief overview of the state of civic engagement research and writing, followed by a broad overview of literature on social media and civic engagement. Following these reviews, we focus more specifically on where these literatures interface with urban governance literatures. Website content analyses from a purposively selected sample of cities in the United States are reported

and two more in depth cases are examined in order to develop an emerging research agenda. This agenda is outlined in closing.

Civic Engagement

Public participation with government is an area of research and practice fraught with competing values claims, each legitimate, and a plethora of context-dependent findings regarding efficacy. "Successful" engagement processes are difficult to fully ascertain, though efforts to apply logical evaluation frameworks have been offered (e.g., Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Nabatchi, 2012) and case studies claiming success are widely available (e.g., Howard, Lipsky, & Marshall, 1994; Hays & Kogl, 2007). Broadly speaking, scholars and practitioners concerned with citizenship vary in the extent to which they encourage dutiful or engaged citizenship (Dalton, 2009). Dutiful citizens are law-abiding and interested in promoting a patriotic identity; engaged citizens are law-abiding but are also concerned with acting proactively to improve community. Cooper (1991) discusses this distinction in terms of low ethical versus high ethical citizenship. Both forms of citizenship are legitimate and have been encouraged at various times and to different degrees in the history of the United States (Bryer, 2012).

The primary concern of this essay is engaged citizenship. Specifically, why is active, engaged citizenship desirable from a governmental perspective? What mechanisms are available to engage citizens in public decision-making and community enrichment? Each question is addressed in turn, before turning to existing research and practice in the use of one particular mechanism for civic engagement: social media.

Engaged Citizenship: Why and How?

A number of benefits can emerge from successful citizen engagement. The first potential benefit is for a better citizen, one who is better educated about

19 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/social-media-civic-engagement/77678

Related Content

Communicative Governance to Mitigate the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Delhi, India

Nidhi Vij Mali, Srinivas Yerramsetti and Aroon P. Manoharan (2021). *International Journal of E-Planning Research* (pp. 116-123).

www.irma-international.org/article/communicative-governance-to-mitigate-the-covid-19-pandemic/262513

A Transdisciplinary Inquiry Into Sustainable Automobility Transitions: The Case of an Urban Enclave in Cape Town

Elizabeth Henshilwood, Mark Swilling and Marjorie L. Naidoo (2019). *International Journal of E-Planning Research* (pp. 13-37).

www.irma-international.org/article/a-transdisciplinary-inquiry-into-sustainable-automobility-transitions/230902

Effect of Urban Computing on the Public's Perception of Place, Community, and Infrastructure

Dimitrios Ringas and Eleni Christopoulou (2020). *Megacities and Rapid Urbanization: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice* (pp. 251-273).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/effect-of-urban-computing-on-the-publics-perception-of-place-community-and-infrastructure/231307

Technology Use by Urban Local Bodies in India to Combat the COVID-19 Pandemic

Falguni Mukherjee (2021). *International Journal of E-Planning Research* (pp. 109-115).

www.irma-international.org/article/technology-use-by-urban-local-bodies-in-india-to-combat-the-covid-19-pandemic/262512

The Role of the Creation and Sharing of Digital Media Content in Participatory E-Planning

Joanna Saad-Sulonen (2012). *International Journal of E-Planning Research* (pp. 1-22).

www.irma-international.org/article/role-creation-sharing-digital-media/66409