New Communication Tools and eParticipation: Social Media in Urban Planning

Stefan Höffken, Chris Haller

(Dipl.-Ing. Stefan Höffken, s.hoeffken@rhrk.uni-kl.de , TU Kaiserslautern, Lehrgebiet cpe, Pfaffenbergstrasse 95, 67663 Kaiserslautern, http://cpe.arubi.uni-kl.de)
(Dipl.-Ing. Chris Haller, challer@urbaninteractivestudio.com, Principal at Urban Interactive Studio LLC, Englewood, CO, http://urbaninteractivestudio.com)

1 ABSTRACT

The Internet and new Web2.0 tools are changing the way we communicate in an unprecedented way. Weblogs, Microblogs (like Twitter), and social media in general enable worldwide, real-time, multimedia communication with low barriers to entry. But in what ways are urban planners taking advantage of these new communication channels? This paper discusses these new opportunities as well as the barriers they present, and it makes recommendations for using social media in the urban planning processes.

It begins with a theoretical overview about participation in urban planning, eParticipation, and social media. In its second part, the paper analyses six real-world projects to study their social media strategies. Those examples will be used to identify best practices and reflect on the usefulness and effectiveness of various social media channels in the context of the planning projects to which they are applied.

2 THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 The Internet and Changes in communication

Technological development over the last decades has radically changed our communication patterns and led to the creation of what has been called the Network Society (CASTELLS 2000a). The Internet and the rise of information and communications technologies (ICT) are the basis for a new technological paradigm which has caused a fundamental shift in our society toward "The Internet Galaxy" (CASTELLS 2005). "Mass communication used to be predominantly one-directional. However, with the diffusion of the Internet a new form of communication has emerged, characterized by the capacity of sending messages from many to many, in real-time - or chosen time, and with the possibility of using point-to-point communication, narrowcasting or broadcasting, depending on the purpose and characteristics of the intended communication practice" (CASTELLS 2009, 55).

With the rise of the Internet in general and more recently with the emergence of Web2.0 - web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web - the costs of global publishing have collapsed (SHIRKY 2008, p. 9). Easy-to-use communication and publishing technologies have caused a shift from predominantly one-to-many to many-to-many communication, challenging the dominance and even the existence of "old" media like television, newspapers, and radio. Today, the Internet provides a low-threshold method of communciation between nearly everybody, worldwide. Whereas real-world communication is limited by distance and time, online tools enable many forms of instant, global, and nearly permanent communication, so that ommuncations are stored online and easily acessible over the long-term by a broader audience (SHIRKY 2008, 87 ff.). "We are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations" (SHIRKY 2008, 20 f.). Never before have people enjoyed the ability to collaboratively collect, analyze, and publish information on such a mass scale.

But, "the invention of a tool doesn't create change; it has to have been around long enough that most of society is using it. It´s when a technology becomes normal, than ubiquitous, and finally so pervasive as to be invisible, that the really profound changes happen, and so for young people today, our social tools have passed normal and are heading to ubiquitous, and invisible is coming" (SHIRKY 2008, 105).

Although the Internet at first was mostly used as an information medium, our developed societies now embrace it as a participatory medium through which to connect, communicate, discuss, and participate in nearly every realm of daily life, from home, to work, to politics. The Internet of today has become "one of the most powerful organizing tools in history" (Bittle et al. 2009, 1).

3 EPARTICIPATION AND WEB2.0 IN URBAN PLANNING

3.1 Web2.0 and social media

The term Web2.0 essentially reflects the current state of the Internet as a truly interactive medium. It describes the shift from top-down, one-way communication to a vastly more participatory medium. Through this 2.0 version of the Internet, users take part in the production of online content: They publish their thoughts on blogs, upload and share videos and photos, and connect with friends using social networks like Facebook, all of which are typically easy to access and free to use. These many-to-many communication tools are commonly referred to as social media, "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (KAPLAN 2010).

Web2.0 has kicked off the digital decade (LOBO 2009) and today a vast majority of people use the Internet as a part of their everyday life. In the United States, 74% of citizens use the Internet (Pew Research Center 2010); in Germany, nearly 70% are regular users (Initiative D21 2009, 10). Furthermore, statistics reveal a penetration of nearly all social groups and ages. Today, the Internet is a communication medium used by the majority of citizens in western societies.

3.2 eParticipation

Recently, our field became embroiled in a heated discussion as to whether the Internet could be used to conduct meaningful public participation. Today, we have mostly moved past this discussion, as many successful participatory projects online have been conducted and online engagement approaches have become a valuable tool. Though it's true that varying degrees of computer skills still require face-to-face alternatives, eParticipation is here to stay. In fact, the amendment in 2004 of the German Town and Country Planning Code (§3 in combination with §4a BauGB) has only emphasized the importance of digital technologies in public participation processes (STREICH 2005, 154).

 eParticipation refers to the participation of citizens and stakeholders in decision-making through the instrument of information and communication technologies, mainly in government and governance. "eParticipation describes efforts to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another, and with their elected representatives and governments, using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Thus, eParticipation can satisfy both the citizens' need for being both heard and involved in the democratic process, and governments' need to devise new mechanisms for promoting and encouraging public consultation" (Tambouris 2007, 5).

eParticipation offers new and effective ways to present, discuss, and visualize ideas and proposals. The digital infrastructure allows planners to easily save and aggregate datasets for ex-post analysis (statistics about activity, collaboration, interaction, group-processes, etc.) and to publish the results.

3.2.1 Different levels of interaction

To categorize and analyze the different categories of interactivity, we will refer to the three different levels as defined by the OECD (OECD 2001):

- Information: A one-way relation in which information is produced and delivered
- Consultation: A two-way relation in which feedback from the users to the project is provided
- Participation: A relation or partnership that allows diverse discussion to shape plans and develop new concepts

The pressing question today is how are planners leveraging the power of social media for urban planning processes? Because urban planning has always been based on the gathering and exchange of information and—as a democratic process—on communication between different stakeholders, a change in the method of communication has a significant impact on decision-making throughout the process.

3.3 Popular Social Media Channels

3.3.1 Twitter

Twitter (www.twitter.com) is a microblogging-service that allows users to publish short messages—140 characters or fewer. It launched in 2006 as a simple way publish and share SMS (short text messages) via the Internet (SARNO 2009). Users have to sign up for an account to publish updates or "tweets," which are publicly accessible the instant they are sent. Updates can be sent via phone, Web interface, or a variety of third party applications, including other Web applications. Others can subscribe to (that is, "follow") the stream and answer (via @useraccount) or forward interesting messages (a so called retweet, or RT) to their followers. Limited by the number of characters, messages typically contain snippets of information and a link to other URLs for more information. Group discussions reference a shared hashtag—each user includes the agreed upon hashtag (#hashtag) in their posts and others can simply follow all posts that contain this piece of information. This naming convention allows groups to easily interact without much coordination, for example at conferences or around elections. All that is required is an agreement on a shared hashtag. Because updates are publicly accessible and the method of networking with others by simply following, responding, and interacting with them openly is a simple one, Twitter has become popular as a simple tool for projects to interact with their respective target audience.

Other similar providers exist, for example the open-source service identi.ca, which supports the OpenMicroBlogging-standard (http://identi.ca/), but none has reached Twitter's popularity.

3.3.2 Facebook

Facebook (www.facebook.com) is a Social Network Service (SNS) that allows friends to communicate and share information, images, and videos. Every user creates a profile, with his or her name, age, interests, and other personal information and then posts status updates or images about their life. By default, profiles and updates are only available to friends and not to the general public. Users add friends to their account by searching for their names or through others they are already friends with (their Social Graph). Once the other person accepts the virtual friendship, both users have access to each other's information and both of their social graphs or networks have grown. Friends can communicate via messages, status updates (visible on their "wall," a real-time activity-stream), and chat. They can also share photos and post events. It´s easy to use and free. Compared to Twitter, user information is typically closed and only accessible to friends, though

Every user has the option of creating or joining public groups. Normal groups allow users who are not friends to collaborate with others who share an interest in the same topic. Pages, or fan groups, are typically organized by one user and are used to represent an NGO, organization, or similar institution. Ordinary users demonstrate their support or interest by becoming "fans." Both types of groups allow group administrators to send messages to all of their members and to use other organizing features. Most groups are member-focused, whereas the communication in fan groups is more one-directional (from organization to fan).

Other popular SNS are Myspace, LinkedIn.com, and Xing.com.

3.3.3 Flickr

Flickr is an image-sharing Web site, which today hosts more than 4 billion photos[1]. Flickr was developed to share personal photographs with others online (SHIRKY 2008) and can be described as an online community of photo enthusiasts. It is also used by bloggers to host images which they embed on their Web sites. Users sign up and create an account with some personal information that is accessible as a public profile to others (similar to Twitter). Uploaded photos can be organized with tags to enable easy searches by topic (e.g. subject, event) and can also be geo-referenced. This makes Flickr a powerful photo-collaboration tool. For example, images from the same event by various photographers can be accessed via a simple tag search. The same is now possible with maps, whereby Flickr allows users to browse pictures that have been taken in their neighborhood. Flickr offers a free account with limited data and an unrestricted pro-version.

Other popular photo-sharing Web sites include Photobucket.com, Picasa, and Panoramio.com.

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[1] http://blog.flickr.net/en/2009/10/12/4000000000/

3.3.4   Youtube

Youtube is a video-sharing Web site where users can upload and share their own videos. The platform is open for everyone to watch or contribute videos. Users have to register in order to upload videos and create a personal profile (similar to Twitter and Flickr), a so-called channel. Youtube can be regarded as an online community, because user can pick favorite channels of subscribe to other users. The service allows users to upload unlimited videos and or to integrate videos to other Web sites (for example, their blogs or Twitter or Facebook accounts) through a piece of html code or via URL.

Other popular video-sharing services include Blip.tv, DailyMotion.com, Vimeo.com, and Brightcove.com.

3.3.5   Overview

All of the services outlined above have become quasi-standards in their particular niche. They share a set of commonalities, like free use, an easy learning curve, and the ability to comment on others' content.

	Twitter	Facebook	Flickr	Youtube
Learning Curve	Easy	Easy	Easy	Easy
Cost	Free	Free	Free (limited webspace)	Free
Ability to Comment	Anyone on their own page	Only Friends	Anyone	Anyone
Detail of Personal Profile	Low	High	Medium	Medium
Public Access to Profile	Yes	Limited	Yes	Yes
Level of Connectivity	High	High	Medium	Medium
Real-time Status Updates	Yes	Yes	No	No
Barriers to Registration	None	None	Yahoo-account needed; Cost for pro account	None

Fig. 2: Overview of the different Social Media Services used in the researched projects (own depiction).

4   EXAMPLES OF PLANNING PROJECTS LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA

To analyze the use of the new social media channels in Urban Planning, we will take a closer look at six examples. We have selected these examples because we feel that they best exemplify today's use of social media in planning projects. We chose three top-down-initiated projects and three bottom-up projects to compare the differences. Because the sample is so small, the results are intended to give a general overview, rather than scientific results. This said, we do feel there's a need for more research in this realm, and we hope that our paper will in some small way inspire further discussion. To our knowledge, there have been no other attempts to analyze the role of social media in urban planning. There are, of course, a number of excellent examples of how to use dedicated online platforms for public participation. However, our paper will focus solely on the use of social media channels for public participation. It is not our intent to analyze the outcomes of eParticipation in urban planning in general.

To get a better sense of how and how effectively social media channels are used in each planning project, we analyzed a set of indicators that include the number of followers/fans/subscribers, the activity of the host (posts, video-uploads, photo-uploads, moderation of discussions), and the responses of participants (comments, video-uploads, photo-uploads, participation in discussions). The different levels of interactivity were classified into three categories: high, medium, and low. Interactivity is understood as the bi-directional communication between different project team and their participants.

4.1 Top-down examples:

In the following pages, we present three top-down initiated projects and then contrast these with a trio of bottom-up projects, all of them initiated by different groups or organizations.

4.1.1 GO TO 2040: Metropolitan Chicago's official comprehensive regional plan

Fig. 3: Screenshot of the main Web site of the GO TO 2040 project

GO TO 2040, the official comprehensive planning campaign for metropolitan Chicago, was launched in August 2009 by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) and makes extensive use of Social Media to support the planning process. The GO TO 2040 processes aims to "develop a preferred future scenario," which is "based on residents' feedback...and on quantitative analysis of...regional indicators." The preferred future scenario is used to develop strategies for the official comprehensive regional plan for metropolitan Chicago.

To get involve residents in the process and to attract them to the many workshops in the region, the project uses a variety of social media channels in addition to its main Web site. These channels include Blog, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and Youtube, all of which are linked from the campaign's Web site. According to Anne Holub from the CMAP, the biggest challenge "was acquiring new followers across social networking platforms" (HOLUB 2009).

	Twitter	Facebook	Flickr	Youtube	Weblog
Followers/Fans	661 followers, featured on 83 lists	277 Fans	36 contacts	5 subscribers	Not available
Project Activity	772 tweets, direct responses to followers	3 uploaded videos, 1 photo album	6 albums (135, 113, 41, 30, 25, 23 visits)	33 uploaded videos (up to 982 views)	Not available
Responses	Many @responses, many RTs, shared links and direct interaction	Few comments and votes on the wall	Few comments	No comments	Few comments
Fan Activity	n/a	2 uploaded fan photos, 0 fan videos	n/a	4,491 visits	Not available
More	n/a	Event calendar	n/a	n/a	Addthis.com bookmarks
Summary of Interactivity	High	Low-Medium	Low	Low	n/a

Fig. 4: Overview of analysis of the grade of interactivity (own depiction).

4.1.2 East Baton Rouge Comprehensive Plan, futurebr.com

Fig. 5: Screenshot of the project's main Web site

The "FUTUREBR" Web site was launched in December 2009 to support the Comprehensive Planning process for East Baton Rouge (EBR), Louisiana, which replaces the old comprehensive plan. A project of the City of Baton Rouge and the Planning Commission of the City, it seeks "to shape future growth in the city and parish over the next 30 years. This project is based on an inclusive, parish-wide process to craft a new vision, policy framework, and implementation strategies that reflect the needs and aspirations of parish citizens. FUTUREBR will guide the physical development of the city and provide a framework within which

individuals, businesses and public officials can make decisions that are consistent with the community's vision for the future."

Participation is open to residents and organizations in the region, which can take part in online discussions or workshops. The project has a central Web site, a blog with project updates, and a social media presence on Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, visitors can subscribe to newsletters and notifications via Email.

	Twitter	Facebook	Blog
Followers/Fans	18 Followers, featured on 1 list	247 group members	Not available
Project Activity	0 tweets	9 videos, 11 photos, No answers to the discussion	6 posts in 4 months (from Dec. 2009 to Mar. 2010)
Responses	No @ responses, 2 tweets about the project	- 7 foreign posts at the wall - 1 post at "discussions" and 0 responses	No comments allowed
Fan Activity	n/a	- 2 fan photos - 1 discussion started	n/a
More	n/a	n/a	n/a
Summary of Interactivity	Very low	Medium	Very low

(Disclaimer: This project just got underway, and it is likely that these numbers will increase.) Fig. 6: Overview analysis of the grade of interactivty of the project FUTUREBR (own depiction)

4.1.3 PLANitulsa – planitulsa.org

Fig. 7: Screenshot of the main Web site of PLANiTULSA.

PLANiTULSA is a project by the City of Tulsa, Oklahoma, to update the city´s Comprehensive Plan. The "Vision for Tulsa lays out concepts for how the City of Tulsa will look, function, and feel over the next 20-30 years. This vision is the guiding document for Tulsa's comprehensive plan update, PLANiTULSA, and

describes the kinds of places, economy, housing and transportation choices, parks, and open spaces that the city's policies should be designed to create." The planning department of Tulsa launched the Web site in April 2008, hoping to involve residents in the process through the Web and public workshops. Social media channels on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn were used to engage and inform residents.

	Twitter	Facebook	LinkedIn
Followers/Fans	2100 followers (But this is the city's account, not the project's)	923 fans	107 members
Project Activity	0 tweets, no interaction with followers	6 moderated discussions with responses from project members	5 moderated discussions
Responses	2 @responses, some retweets of the project	Few votes and comments on the wall	9 comments to discussions
Fan Activity	A few followers used the hashtag #PLANiTULSA to send updates from meetings	0 fan photos, 0 fan videos	None
More	n/a	Event Calender	n/a
Summary of Interactivity	Low	High	Low

Fig. 8 Overview analysis of the grade of interactivty at project PLANiTULSA (own depiction)

4.2 Bottom-up examples:

4.2.1 Megaspree

Fig. 7: Screenshot of the main Web site of the bottom-up movement Megaspree.

Megaspree is a bottom-up citizen initiative formed in 2009 when its founders were organizing a protest march against the Mediaspree project, a large waterfront real estate development in East Berlin, Germany. The movement criticized the lack of social infrastructure and public spaces, as well as the project's planned displacement of subculture and low-income residents. The biggest success of the citizen movement was a public petition for a referendum in 2008, which was initiated by Mediaspree-Versenken[2], during which more than 30,000 citizens of the district of Berlin Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain voted 87% against Mediaspree. The movement is probably one of the most successful citizen-activism projects in Berlin in recent years. The initiative used a number of social media channels to engage its supporters: blogs, Twitter, Myspace, and Facebook.

	Twitter	Facebook	Blog	Myspace
Followers/Fans	220 Followers	2892 fans	Not available	2312 friends
Project Activity	131 tweets, no interaction with followers	- 6 videos - 8 albums	30 posts in 9 months (from Jul. 2009 to Mar. 2010)	Blogposts, 3 videos
Responses	No @responses, no interaction with followers	A lot of comments on the wall	Few comments	A lot posts, but only few about the project
Fan Activity	n/a	- 12 fan photos - 1 fan videos	None	Some votes, few comments
More	Using Twitter API to allow citizens to tweet visions and fears (barely used)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Summary of Interactivity	Low	Medium/High	Low	Low

Fig. 8: Overview analysis of the grade of interactivity at project Megaspree (own depiction)

4.2.2 Canal Connection, canalconnection.com

Fig. 9: Screenshot of the main Web site of the bottom-up movement Canal Connection.

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[2] Translates to "Sink Mediaspree"

Canal Connection is an interesting example of a citizen-driven project in support of urban development. In Oklahoma, MAPS 3 is a tax-increase initiative to fund future development projects, started with recent MAPS initiative funding. The Canal Connection initiative aimed to add a canal extension and bridge to the proposed MAPS 3-funded convention center, to connect it to their neighborhood. "Bricktown is the face of Oklahoma City, and must be tied to future downtown development conveniently and safely." The project is coordinated by the "Bricktown Association in cooperation with multiple groups" and has organizational support of three local associations. The Bricktown Association "operates as a voluntary association whose primary goal is to promote the businesses in and around Bricktown and the entertainment district as a whole."

	Twitter	Facebook	Blog
Followers/Fans	199 Followers, featured on 13 lists	7665 fans (Not just project related – Bricktown Association)	Not available
Project Activity	12 tweets, 1 @responses, no interaction with followers	Many comments and votes	No comments allowed
Responses	2 @responses, 1 RT	3 albums	Rarely used, just 6 blog posts overall
Fan Activity	n/a	2 fan photos	None
More	n/a	Event announcements	n/a
Summary of Interactivity	Low	Medium	Low

Fig. 10: Overview analysis of the grade of interactivty at project Canal Connection (own depiction)

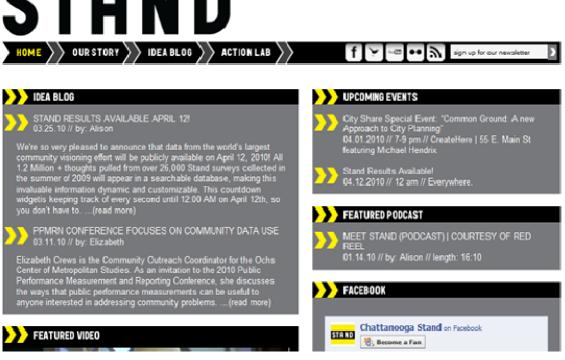### 4.2.3 Chattanooga STAND, chattanoogastand.com

Fig. 11: Screenshot of the main Web site of the bottom-up project STAND

STAND is a community visioning effort "to engage community members to express their ideas for the future, organize around common purposes and translate vision into action." In 2008, different groups of citizens launched STAND "with a four-question survey and an initial goal of collecting responses from residents across the Chattanooga region," which ended up netting more than 26,000 responses. "The results of Stand's survey effort will be released to the public in early 2010. From there, STAND will encourage, enable and facilitate as many people in as many places as possible in creating their own changes to benefit not only those who filled out a survey, but the entire region—and like-minded cities everywhere."

	Twitter	Facebook	Youtube	Flickr	Idea Blog
Followers/Fans	537 Followers, featured on 26 lists	1,714 fans	0 subscribers	1 contact	Not available
Project Activity	566 tweets, many @responses and direct interaction with followers	Some comments and votes on the wall	no comments	no responses	no comments
Responses	Many @responses, many RTs, shared links and direct interaction	34 albums, 8 videos, no discussions	3 uploads	1 group (2 members)	42 posts in 11 months
Fan Activity	n/a	2 fan photos uploaded	Views: 656, 16, 12	n/a	n/a
More	n/a	Event calendar	n/a	Integration of Flickr photos on the Web site via Flickr feed	Additional Action Lab Blog with integrated videos from createhere.org (via vimeo.com)
Summary of Interactivity	High	Medium	Low	Low	Low

Fig. 12: Overview analysis of the grade of interactivity at project STAND (own depiction)

5 CONCLUSIONS

Each of these projects deploys a different (though often overlapping) set of social media channels and each has its own way of utilizing those channels. Variations in the level of interaction (comments, votes, discussions, fan uploads) and the spread of the participants (number of fans, lists, subscribers, followers) are enormous, not just from project to project, but also between the different channels within each project. Twitter and Facebook are the most commonly used channels and most effective tools. The following diagram summarizes the different uses:

	Top-down	**Bottom-up**
Twitter	Most commonly used as a push medium for updates, but used effectively by Goto2040 to build a participant base.	Most commonly used as a push medium for updates. But more willingness to explore using them for more interaction and embracing of user-submitted content (e.g. using the API)
Facebook	Used for the same updates as on Twitter, but with added functionality like Events. Barely used as a platform for discussion.	Used for the same updates as on Twitter, but with added functionality like Events. Barely used as a platform for discussion. Pages of the bottom-up projects typically have higher numbers of fans indicating support for the project, than top-down-projects.
Flickr	A hosting service for photos, but not as a platform for interaction.	Only used in one case as a hosting service for photos.
Youtube	A hosting service for videos, but not as a platform for interaction.	Not used at all.
Weblogs	A push-medium for news. Few actually allow comments.	A push-medium for news. Few actually allow comments.

Fig. 13: Difference between use of Social Media in Top-down vs. Bottom-up projects.

Referring to 2.2.3, the different social tools are analyzed according to their levels of interaction and how they were used and implemented in the various projects.

	Information (provide updates, information)	**Consultation (interact with project, provide feedback)**	**Participation (shape plans)**
Twitter	6 projects	2 Projects	-
Facebook	6 Projects	5 Projects	-
Flickr	2 projects	-	-
Youtube	2 projects	-	-
Weblogs	6 projects	2 Projects	-

Fig. 14: Social Media at the different levels of interaction

5.1 Observations

On average, the greatest focus and highest activity and interaction in all of the aforementioned projects was seen on Facebook and Twitter. This is probably due to the high level of connectivity and the real-time aspect, as illustrated in Fig. 2. The examples show that Twitter is typically used as a push medium for project updates, probably because of its ease of use and the brevity of its messages. And, as Goto2040 and STAND demonstrate, a pro-active networking approach to using Twitter can generate support for projects in various ways. We've seen participants retweet event announcement, ask questions, and even provide positive feedback or quotes, like this one in Tulsa: "PLANiTULSA named best thing about 2009 by Urban Tulsa! http://bit.ly/58Ur7I." One thing we were missing is the use of a hashtag to exchange ideas around a project. Only PLANiTULSA had a few instances in which users provided event updates via hashtag (and these entirely user-created, inasmuch as the project didn't have a Twitter account). The effective use of hashtags could greatly improve the use of Twitter as a participatory medium.

Facebook offers more traditional ways of interaction and was used as a two-directional channel through which participants commented, voted, and started discussions. Such interactions were typically limited in

scope and intensity, though this is quite typical for Facebook. Indeed, fan pages and groups are often merely regarded as a way to show support or opposition for a given cause by joining, and not as a vehicle for sustained participation. This can also be seen by the higher numbers of fans for citizen-activism projects, compared to their official counterparts. Nonetheless, offering a fan page can be an effective means of gathering support, with the added benefit that event announcements and project updates can be easily broadcast to all fans. On the other side, Facebook is more personal in nature, which has implications for its use for planning projects. Though the group and fan pages on Facebook offer the greatest variety of tools for organizers (discussions, links, the ability to upload photos and videos, integration of other content), comments were often superficial and discussions were barely used. Additionally, Facebook users are often careful about protecting their privacy and typically share with their circle of friends rather than with the whole world, which limits the platform's use for general networking.

Overall, both Twitter and Facebook offer excellent ways to reach out to citizens and direct them to a project's Web site for deeper engagement or participation. Because Twitter and Facebook are somewhat limited both in the scope of activities they offer as well as the kinds of tools they offer, they tend to serve best as a kind of point-of-entry through which more vigorous and serious participation can be accessed. For their part, Goto2040 and STAND both demonstrated how providing URLs to surveys with compelling calls-to-action not only brought followers to their Web sites to participate but also, through retweeting, reached a far greater audience by bridging networks to connect with participants who might otherwise never have taken part.

The other channels didn´t attract discussion or high interactivity. Flickr and Youtube seem to be used mainly as hosting platforms, offering free Web space for videos and photos and providing easy ways to integrate them into the main Web site or to link to them. Even though all of these services provide the tools for feedback, they are rarely used by participants. None of the projects made use of a common tag to encourage citizens or participants to share photos in a common pool. We've seen this technique effectively used in other projects, and it's another low-barrier way to engage some of the more active citizens in a community.

Whether any of these channels can help projects to become more inclusive with diverse participation can't be answered by this analysis. Most likely, the answer would be some form of "it depends." We do want to point out, though, that the connections made by some of the projects that actively used Twitter seemed interesting. By using Twitter search tools to directly target users, projects seemed to interact with local decision-makers, journalists, bloggers, and other observers that all act as influencers within their own networks. Perhaps more than any other tool, Twitter enables this kind of open-networking and might ultimately lead to more inclusive participation by connecting different local networks. Interestingly, LinkedIn might work in a similar fashion, but was only used by one project.

To our surprise, more than one project provided a blog that did not allow visitors to comment. In a way then, these platforms had much in common with the news sections of Web sites as was typical in the 1990s, and technically we wouldn't consider those updates to be a blog. But this raises the question: How can organizers track, moderate, and answer comments or feedback from a large variety of channels? Rarely did the various projects seem to have an overarching strategy for how all these social media channels work together. We wonder how many of them first identified the overarching goals and objectives, and only then picked their social media channels and created an engagement plan that addresses these issues (more on this subject below). Ultimately, it's necessary to fine-tune the channels and how they interact to keep feedback manageable. For example, why offer a discussion board on Facebook if nobody is expected to use it? Or, perhaps worse, offer one that no staff member is assigned to monitor or post responses to? Within this logic, it might make sense to offer a "blog" that simply provides updates without allowing comments and to sync it to Twitter and Facebook. It keeps the overhead down and limited staff resources can be used to focus on more important channels or activities.

Overall, the most important channel for online communication in each of the projects we looked at seems to be the central Web site, which links and connects with all the other social media channels. The main Web site can be connected with other tools, to post and distribute information to all other channels in order to make the process of keeping users up-to-date as easy as possible. And though all the new social media channels we looked at are worthwhile and are increasingly important, traditional online communication tools like blogs and newsletter signups remain an important cornerstone for any outreach effort.

5.2 Recommendations

Though the further integration of social media may have become an increasingly mainstream priority, proven strategies for doing so are not easy to come by. It all comes down to this: Social media strategy must have a defined goal. Whether this is to educate citizens about the tradeoffs and alternatives of a planning project, to identify local connectors and network with them, or to collect feedback about different alternative scenarios, in order to be successful the outcomes must be defined and quantifiable. After the goal is defined, the timeframe and target audience of a social media campaign should become clearer. Will this be a short-term campaign, or something more permanent? And depending on the audience, various social media technologies should be weighed as to which is most appropriate in attaining the identified goal.

One thing that becomes obvious when taking a closer look at the various planning projects is that it's one thing to create project Web sites or Social Media accounts, but it's a totally different story to actually get people to visit them and get engaged. To avoid non-participation, we recommend creating an Engagement Plan[3], a document that to outline a project's strategy for getting an audience to participate well before its Web site and social media accounts are launched. The elements of an Engagement Plan should include:

Channels: Which complementary on- and offline channels will the project use to let people know about or contribute to the project? How will the project tie them together? How will the project keep them updated, facilitated, and responsive?

Activities: What will the project ask people to do on its site and elsewhere? Without a clear indication of what is expected, nobody will actually begin. For example, if a project wants its audience to use Flickr, perhaps it could offer a photo contest? What incentives can the project provide to reward participation?

Roles and responsibilities: Who is responsible for content creation, animation, promotion, outreach, tech support, and other functions? Is someone at the project prepared to provide the first comments, videos, etc. until such time as a community forms around the project?

Timeline: What needs to happen and when (including dependencies and periodic evaluation of success metrics)?

Use Policy: What principles should the project team keep in mind in order to define a consistent voice and approach for the project (SAMUEL 2008).

Before implementing a new engagement plan, addressing the maintenance of the campaign is critical. Leveraging the power of social media for a project requires a lot of detailed, time-consuming work.

6   OUTLOOK

With the widespread adoption of mobile devices and the mobile Internet, new services are emerging that bring social media directly into our neighborhoods. Smartphones like the iPhone provide a new platform for location-based-services and mobile participation processes, while becoming more widely used. Mobile applications amplify participation in a spatial and temporal dimension and will widen the range of possible uses for urban planning and design. Whether traveling in the metro or sitting in a coffee shop, participants not only can read or post updates but they will also be able to interact with the built environment and others around them in real-time. As an example, new location-aware social media applications like Foursquare and Gowalla are paving the way for online engagement around any given city. Both services offer a check-in system through which users share their current locations, interact with other users, and earn badges for visiting a certain number of places. Users who check in most frequently become the "mayor" of a location. And this is just the start of what will surely become the widespread adoption of location-aware services. Indeed, even as we prepared this article, Twitter opened its Geo-API and it is expected that Facebook will roll out similar features in the near future[4]. This offers two interesting angles for our planning professions:

- By aggregating user locations that will soon be widely available, planners will be able to analyze mobility and usage patterns of neighborhoods, identifying clusters and areas of decline.

- By working with services like Foursquare, Twitter, and others, planners will be able to create their own games and provide engaging channels for citizens to get engaged. The oft-hyped crowd-

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[3] http://www.socialsignal.com/blog/alexandra-samuel/engagement-planning
[4] http://mashable.com/2009/12/25/foursquare-gowalla/

sourcing only works if there's a fun, entertaining side to collecting data or mapping neighborhoods. Location-aware games could provide a venue to get citizens involved early in the planning process.

Armed with new social media tools and access to information, citizen planners will soon join professionals in our search for the liveable cities of tomorrow.

To advance the use of social media in Urban Planning, exchanging ideas, experiences, and lessons learned is critical. Therefore, we invite you to provide your feedback and share your own experiences with us and others in the comments section at http://engagingcities.com/post/484625327/corpsocialmedia

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