GSA Office of Citizen Services and Communications

Intergovernmental Solutions Newsletter

Engaging Citizens in Government

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Increasing Citizen Engagement in Government

By Darlene Meskell
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About 2500 years before the Internet Age, Athenians developed a system of self-government they called democracy, which relied on active citizen participation for direction and decision-making. A few millennia later, the founding fathers of the United States built a country around the proposition that government must be responsive to the needs of its citizens. They knew that, for democracy to flourish, citizens must take an active part in public life, sharing their ideas and opening their minds to the opinions of others, and taking ownership in the well-being of the country.

The arrival of the Internet created new opportunities for citizen engagement through its powerful ability to organize. Online town meetings, social media, chat rooms, bulletin boards, deliberative processes for e-rulemaking, and feedback mechanisms that sort input from public meetings are examples of inexpensive mechanisms for soliciting citizen input. All of these tools have a positive impact on public policy development because when people get involved everyone learns from each other, relationships are built, trust is established and the final outcome improved.

Connecting to the Internet has become easier than ever. The members of today's digital generation have grown up with phones in their pockets and expect a government that attends to their needs 24/7. New applications appear daily and allow users to create, share and link content. These new applications intersect with the Internet but also reach beyond it.

As civic participation online grows, so does the public's understanding of what is behind government policies and processes and so does the government's understanding of the diverse public views and knowledge about complex problems. Online engagement also helps build communities around the issues that people find important, letting the community members interact with each other, and eliminates barriers associated with physical distance and travel costs and other

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impediments facing citizens who want to have their voices heard.

GSA's Intergovernmental Solutions has compiled these contributions from governments, advocacy groups and academia to show how the use of the Internet to facilitate open government is already making a difference across the country and around the world. Following is a run-down of the stories they tell.

When people have the opportunity to contribute ideas and opinions to government decision-making processes they are empowered to mobilize and become involved with real initiatives on a national level and in their communities. Echoing Abraham Lincoln in ***By the People, for the People***, Katie Stanton, the new U.S. director of Citizen Participation, discusses the online engagement practices the Obama Administration has used to change the landscape from one where citizens are viewed as "customers" to one in which they have a personal stake.

The United Kingdom has made great strides shifting the paradigm from government communication to citizens to one of collaboration with the public. In ***Citizen Engagement***, Andrew Stott, the U.K.'s new director of Digital Government, describes their journey to use the Internet to give citizens a voice. The potential of the Internet for public engagement is just beginning to be tapped and we are already seeing its impact on the democratic process. During fiscal year 2009 the National Academy of Public Administration conducted four online public dialogues on topics ranging from the very focused dialogue on the recovery.gov website to the much broader quadrennial homeland security review. NAPA's experience in this area informs a discussion of how ***National Dialogues Build Communities*** but leads its Lena Trudeau to counsel that governance is still the province of governments, which cannot delegate their responsibilities to the crowd.

In ***Believable Change: A Reality Check on Online Participation***, Jed Miller, Internet Director at the Revenue Watch Institute, reminds us we still have a long way to go before the tools are ready and institutions and individuals can turn the optimism into actual operational change. Drawing a parallel between the evolution of IT and the Internet, California Chief Technology Officer P.K. Agarwal, in ***Reinventing "We the People,"*** envisions how civic engagement will be improved through the evolution of mobile appliances and wireless technologies. While technology and other tools are essential to participatory government, Carolyn Lukensmeyer of America*Speaks* cautions that ***Data is Not Democracy*** and that civic participation still calls for in-person interpersonal engagement.

Imagine how the White House might work if it were run by thousands of people over the Internet. ***Could Citizens Run the White House Online?*** describes what happens on a website that simulates setting Administration priorities by crowdsourcing. In a somewhat more tradition-bound practice, the U.K. has digitized its long-standing custom whereby the prime minister accepts citizen-generated petitions for changes to government policies or practices. ***E-Petitions Preserves an Old British Tradition***. Posting these petitions along with the prime minister's response has enlivened the interaction between citizens and their government.

Other countries are also inviting online participation. Estonia, a Baltic nation that was once a part of the Soviet Union, has created a Web-based e-participation portal that

promotes active citizen engagement in the national legislative process. ***My* better *Estonia*** shows the progress that has been made using this forum for citizens to discuss legislative proposals. The Brazilian House of Representatives recently launched the e-Democracia project to engage citizens in the legislative process. ***E-participatory Lawmaking in Brazil*** looks at the approach Brazil is taking to open the debate on law-making. Elsewhere in that country, participatory budgeting allows citizens to influence budget allocations made by their government and has a big impact on the lives of citizens. ***Participatory Budgeting in Brazil and Argentina*** examines whether this experiment can live up to expectations. Back in the United States, the Pew internet and American Life Project reports that the ***Well-off and Well-educated Are More Likely to Engage*** with the government online—and off.

Attempts to bring citizens into policy-making are common on the local level, but federal and state agencies also are soliciting public participation in policy development. When Fairfax County, Virginia, faced a revenue shortfall of $650,000 million for fiscal year 2010, the county turned to its citizens for help. Through face-to-face meetings, an extensive media campaign and outreach program, and use of social media, ***Public Engagement in Fairfax County's FY 2010 Budget*** helped create a budget that was acceptable to the community. In ***Citizen Engagement and E-Government***, Oakland County, Michigan's Phil Bertolini provides real-world examples of how e-government and Web 2.0 functionality enable, support ,and deepen citizen engagement at the local level.

In ***Washington Goes to Mr. Smith: The Changing Role of Citizens in Policy Development***, Matt Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Forum reports lessons learned from several federal agency programs on how governments can work productively with citizens online. In one of the most impressive examples of the impact of Web-enabled democracy, the State of Ohio invited citizens to participate in an ***Ohio Redistricting Competition*** to design a legislative redistricting plan. When three winning entries proved to be more fair and equitable than the State Legislature's version, an amendment to the State Constitution was drawn up to permanently change the way districts are apportioned in the future.

Planning for Citizen Engagement offers advice for rural communities on how to engage more citizens in the decision making process. In Worchester, Massachusetts, citizens roam the streets each weekend carrying handheld computers and digital cameras looking for potholes, abandoned vehicles and other public nuisances and report them to the appropriate government agency. ***Potholes and PDAs*** highlights creative ways local governments are collaborating with citizens to improve service delivery for the benefit of the entire community.

Civic Journalism is helping ordinary people engage more deeply within their communities, as ***New Media Makers Pioneer Novel Forms of News***. Jan Schaffer, director of the Institute for Innovative Journalism, looks at how this phenomenon—fed by the rapid economic decline of traditional news organizations—Is providing communities with reliable, accurate and independent information. Contests, too, bring out the innovators. When the Environmental Protection Agency needed a fresh new way to get the word out about the dangers of naturally occurring radon gas, it designed a video-production contest to recruit creative citizens to help spread this critical public health message. ***Putting Your Audience to Work: EPA's Radon Video Contest*** gives the results.

Many members of the generations born after the Internet are working hard to bring about meaningful change in their communities. Two of them created ***A Millennial Model of Citizen Engagement***. Kim Kobza of Neighborhood America identifies ***Emerging Themes for Effective Online Citizen Engagement*** that include having a clear sense of purpose, sensitivity to human motivators, a network perspective, and a willingness to relax traditional rules.

So we won't forget the ongoing worldwide collaboration to create universal standards that makes open government feasible, ***The Importance of Open Web Standards for Open and Transparent Government*** emphasizes the importance of available and accessible interfaces and tools, so that what is saved, discoverable, archived and managed will be available in the future on demand.

Countries around the world are creating opportunities for citizens to participate in government. The Web is fostering better communications and allows people to participate in improving the operations of their government. By harnessing the collaborative nature of the Web, democratic governments are engaging the public like never before. In the memorable words of folksinger Pete Seeger, who single-handedly inspired the citizens' campaign that successfully cleaned up the Hudson River in New York State: "Participation—that's what's gonna save the human race."

Darlene Meskell is the Director of the GSA Center for Intergovernmental Solutions in the GSA Office of Citizen Services and Communications.

By the People, For the People

By Katie Stanton
Director of Citizen Participation
The White House

One of President Obama's first acts was signing a *Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government*. The memorandum outlined three principles in the workings of government: transparency, participation and collaboration. With the help of innovative and emerging technologies, we have seen these principles come alive in many forms across the Government, including the Open for Questions program, Data.gov, the IT Dashboard and the Open Government Brainstorm.

The Open for Questions program launched in March and offered Americans a direct line to the President. The program encouraged the public to submit questions via text or video and to vote on the best questions to ask the president. Within a few days, more than 90,000 people representing all 50 states submitted over 100,000 questions and cast over 3.6 million votes. The average number of votes per participant was 38. The questions covered a wide range of issues including education, home ownership, health care reform and green jobs and energy. President Obama responded to several of the top questions at a town hall held at the White House, which was streamed live on Whitehouse.gov as well as the official White House channels on Facebook and YouTube. In addition, several members of the Administration, including Kareem Dale, Special Assistant to the President for Disability Policy, and Jared Bernstein, the Vice President's Chief Economist and Economic Policy Advisor, provided follow-up answers through video.

Data.gov provides access to federal data as well as giving the public the ability to use data creatively outside the walls of government. Data.gov launched in May and had 47 datasets including ozone trends, mineral resources, and patent applications. By August, there were over 110,000 datasets and some terrific examples of citizens reusing these feeds. For example, one uses data from the Federal Aviation Administration, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and Bureau of Transportation Statistics via Data.gov to find the most on-time flight between two airports.

In July, the IT Dashboard, part of USASpending.gov, launched. The IT Dashboard provides an easy way for the public to track federal IT initiatives and hold the government accountable for progress and results. The dashboard allows citizens to see which IT projects are working and which ones are on schedule and to provide direct feedback to the respective chief information officer at federal agencies. Soon after the launch, the IT Dashboard helped shed light on the performance of projects within the federal government. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs found 45 tech projects that were either behind schedule or over budget so they put a temporary freeze on them. The combined value for the 45 projects was approximately $200 million. The worst offender was estimated to be 110 percent over budget and 17 months behind schedule. The department is currently auditing these projects to determine which ones need new management, which ones need additional resources and which ones should be completely discontinued.

Another interesting program was the Open Government Brainstorm, a partnership between the National Academy of Public Administration and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. This platform allowed the public to submit their ideas relating to open government, including innovative approaches to policy, projects, and government agencies. In over a week, the Brainstorm generated 4,000 users and over 1,120 unique ideas that prompted 2,176 comments and 46,469 votes.

But it isn't just these big projects which are making a difference. There are plenty of great, smaller projects happening everywhere in government. Many agencies' blogs now have thriving commenter communities such as the Transportation Service Authority (http://www.tsa.gov/blog/). The Environmental Protection Agency is getting its readers to answer questions to help further its mission (http://blog.epa.gov/blog/category/question-of-the-week/). We are also seeing a number of agencies run contests to offer incentives for citizens to become more involved in their government. For example, USA.gov had a photo contest on July 4th (http://www.flickr.com/groups/4th-of-july-2009-usagov/rules/) and the Department of Health and Human Services is currently running a video contest to promote better health habits around H1N1 (http://www.flu.gov/psa/psacontest1.html).

All of these actions help shape a landscape of open, transparent and participatory government. Further, they help raise some important questions: How do we use the aggregate input to create efficiencies and stronger policy decisions? How do we sift through thousand of comments to understand what citizens are telling us? How do we create engagement platforms that have a low barrier to entry, so that everyone can participate? How do we ensure every American can participate, and will want to participate in the process?

Katie Jacobs Stanton was appointed Director of Citizen Participation in the White House Office of New Media in February.

Citizen Engagement

By Andrew Stott
Director of Digital Engagement
The Cabinet Office
United Kingdom

Knowledge is power. The fundamental driver behind citizen engagement is that only those with access to knowledge are truly empowered. The great democratisation comes not from allowing people to access data but from letting them use it in a way they see fit.

The use of all forms of digital media – not just the Internet – allows for tremendous influence on public policy and services. It is not "communication" in the conventional sense. We must start with informing, and doing so in ways which fit the needs of modern citizens who expect to find the information when and where they need it, rather than when an agency wants to broadcast it. However the informing must allow engagement, with the ability to respond and to be seen to respond. The process needs to become two-way, and lead to a dialogue not only with the agency but also between its citizens and other stakeholders; hearing a plurality of views is important in any evidence-based decision-making, and if a balance can emerge that commands broad support then the eventual decision will be more sound and more sustainable.

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In essence, therefore, engagement is about turning communication into collaboration - collaboration in which citizens can make their voices heard, policy-makers can detect areas that really concern the public, service administrators can streamline delivery, and the leaders of government can use these new channels to work across organisational and geographic boundaries. And by expanding beyond the traditional Internet – into "Web 2.0" country – we reach a generation for whom websites are considered too conventional; the same generation with whom it is most important to engage in longer-term change - on sustainability and climate change, on fighting obesity and promoting health and on developing skills.

The UK Government's Digital Engagement journey began around three years ago with the independent Power of Information Report by Ed Mayo and Tom Steinberg. Among its many insights was that citizen engagement was already happening on the Internet among citizens themselves - in discussion groups, blogs, social media sites and membership groups such as Netmums, a networking site for parents. The key issue was that the Government was not engaging with that engagement, and that its principal model of operation was still a broadcast one.

Although the Power of Information Report set out some clear principles, and some overriding policy changes which were needed (and which were made), the key to making progress in the next phase was to encourage innovation within and outside government - to find out what worked and what did not, quickly and at moderate cost, and with real use and value to citizens - and then build on success.

One of the first services, launched in 2006, was the e-Petitions part of the No. 10 website. http://www.number10.gov.uk is the official website of the UK prime minister's office and refers to its address at No. 10 Downing Street, London. This was seen as shockingly novel at the time, and it was pushed through by a combination of bold leadership and an innovative communications and development team. Yet it quickly established itself as a part of the architecture of political debate, and has now had nearly 10 million signatures on 25,000 petitions with a wide range of subjects. Indeed the impact and relevance of e-Petitions has reached beyond the "digital" community into the mainstream of political analysis and debate, particularly after 1.7 million citizens signed an e-Petition about congestion charging. Yet it can only be one of a range of tools for a government to listen to citizens' views: as Peter Riddell, one of Britain's leading political journalists, wrote: "Petitions ... indicate the intensity of feeling on an issue and often the extent of organisation by protesters, but not the balance of views. ...

Search petitions: Go

Open petitions | Closed petitions | Rejected petitions

Sort by: Start date | Deadline | Signatures

First | Previous | Petitions 1 – 50 of 4383 | Next | Last

We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to...	Submitted by	Signatures
resign.	Kalvis Jansons	71139
prevent local health centres and hospitals from using 08 numbers such as 0844, 0845 or 0870	Guy Mayhew	41721
apologize for the prosecution of Alan Turing that led to his untimely death (with response)	John Graham-Cumming	31732
Protect the RNLI from paying licence fees for using Maritime radio frequencies. (with response)	Ian Smith	31631
reconsider the decision to remove British Forces Post Offices from mainland europe.	Mrs Debra Stevens	23433
demand that the Financial Services Compensation Scheme reimburses The Christie hospital with the £6.5 million lost in the Icelandic banking collapse.	Mark Richardson	20151
Scrap the unnecessary and draconian usage of the 696 Form from London music events.	Jon McClure	17956
pressure the treasury to honour its previous promise that student loans taken out after '98 will follow inflation	Miss Olivia Vanbergen	17419
To instruct Relevant parties to investigate Hillsborough Disaster in 1989 to investigate if Criminal Charges should be brought against any organisation or person	Ian Edwards	16092
change the law to allow children born alive the right to life	Sarah Capewell	15709
Make St Georges Day a national bank holiday for all of England if not the UK	Oliver Claydon	12151
stop criminalising live music with the Licensing Act, and to support amendments backed by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and the music industry, which would exempt most small-scale performances in schools, hospitals, restaurants and licensed premises.	Phil Little	11504
ensure an exemption for epilepsy from the new generic prescribing proposals, on the grounds that the active ingredients in different brands of anti-epileptic medication can legally vary by up to 45%		

A sampling of open petitions at http:||petitions.number10.gov.uk, one of a range of tools to listen to citizens' views

Direct participation should supplement, not replace, representative democracy."

So we have been moving digital engagement forward from a simple vote to giving the citizen a voice. An important subsequent step has been to start publishing consultation papers and reports in a commentable form, where citizens can comment on individual proposals at a paragraph-by-paragraph level, and can see what others are commenting and comment on that. That changes the dynamics of consultation - not longer just the flood of letters and emails at the end of the consultation period, but a dialogue throughout. Many departments have used the Commentariat theme for Wordpress to implement this; this was developed for the Science White Paper by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and we have released the theme back to the community as Open Source. We are also looking at how government documents can be released in XML or through an API so that others can embed them in their web services.

In parallel with this, we are also developing our capability to use "new media" to inform and enthuse citizens about the work that government is doing on their behalf. Blogs from individual civil servants about doing their jobs - for instance project officers working overseas for the Department for International Development bring home to our own citizens what our aid programme is really delivering to communities across the developing world, and the ability to comment and interact gives the change for people here to find out more and become engaged in that work.

At the same time we always need to be conscious that a significant proportion of the population are not yet online and "digitally included." In Digital Britain the UK Government has announced major initiatives to ensure that the infrastructure enables broadband to the whole country and that people have the skills and the motivation to access the Internet. But we do need to ensure that engagement itself is inclusive, and that means using a blend of channels to reach those who need to be engaged.

Going forward there are three key challenges. First, to ensure that the learning and knowledge of what works spreads quickly and effectively from agency to agency. Second, to ensure that engagement is embedded as a normal part of the policy and the service design processes, as we have set out in Working Together: Public Services on Your Side. Third, to ensure that we look at new technologies as they emerge as new opportunities and new tools to apply the principles of good communications and engagement.

Andrew Stott was named the UK Government's first Director of Digital Engagement in May. He was previously the UK Government's Deputy CIO.

National Dialogues Build Communities

By Lena E. Trudeau, Vice President
Frank Reeder, Fellow
National Academy of Public Administration

"Our commitment to openness means more than simply informing the American people about how decisions are made. It means recognizing that government does not have all the answers, and that public officials need to draw on what citizens know. And that's why, as of today, I'm directing members of my administration to find new ways of tapping the knowledge and experience of ordinary Americans -- scientists and civic leaders, educators and entrepreneurs -- because the way to solve the problems of our time, as one nation, is by involving the American people in shaping the policies that affect their lives."

President Barack Obama, January 21, 2009

A Call to Action

Civic engagement is a long-standing principle and practice of good government—it's in our democracy's DNA. Right now, however, there is a unique convergence—between the need to do things in government in a fundamentally different way (which isn't all that new) and our ability to use Web 2.0 and the collaboration it enables to achieve this (that's the new part).

President Obama has directed his appointees and the agencies they lead to collaborate with their colleagues and the public to develop new solutions to our country's problems. The White House itself has embraced new ways to engage stakeholders and citizens in such conversations, using one of the most effective methods of engagement – a structured online discussion using a flexible web-based 2.0 platform. The National Academy of Public Administration has been pleased to assist with several such "national dialogues" – for the White House Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board (website), the Office of Management and Budget (website), and, most recently, for the Department of Homeland Security at: http://www.homelandsecuritydialogue.org/

The temptation when developing a collaborative dialogue is to focus on building the perfect technology platform. But the functionality of the platform is irrelevant if no one participates in the conversation. And let's never forget—although an increasingly powerful tool, technology alone is not the answer to civic engagement.

Building a Community

By their very nature, web-based consultations that are open to the public promote the creation of what Harvard Professor Andrew McAfee has called "emergent expertise" – communities of people who may not be official "experts" on a topic, but who are knowledgeable, engaged, and willing to devote time and energy to the issue. Rather than "one and done" events, online dialogues can be used to build productive and durable relationships between government and a community of interested citizens.

The temptation when developing a collaborative dialogue is to focus on building the perfect technology platform. But the functionality of the platform is irrelevant if no one participates in the conversation.

Through its work on the Collaboration Project and four increasingly successful online dialogues, the National Academy has identified four important steps in the process that will help you build a durable, problem-solving community online.

1. ***Define the Problem:*** Choose a real problem that is within your purview to address. Asking questions that are too broad or generic is a sure-fire way to increase your bounce rate – people who take one look and then leave. And seeking solutions to problems that your agency can't address is a sure-fire path to frustration. If you are worried that people won't understand the issue, remember that you can provide background information on the site itself. In fact, you should plan on it. Just make sure the background information, like your issue, is accessible, relevant and engaging.
2. ***Determine Who Cares...or Should Care:*** Don't kid yourself..."the public" is probably not your target

audience. As much as everyone in Washington wants to believe that everyone should care about the intricacies of public policy and government programs, they don't. But you can be sure that some people care, and it's your job to figure out what distinguishes them from everyone else.

3. ***Create a Value Exchange:*** You're going to ask people to give you their time, their ideas, and their considered judgment of the ideas of others. What will they get in exchange? Clearly, we're not talking about financial remuneration, but it's not enough to simply give people a place to sound off. If you want to create a durable community, you not only have to tell them how their input will be used, but also tell them how it has been used. Feedback is critical, as are continuing opportunities to engage on the same or related substance. In fact, the National Academy has found that a multi-tiered process is often most effective; giving participants separate and distinct opportunities to (1) submit ideas, (2) discuss and collaboratively refine the ideas, and, finally, (3) rate and prioritize them.

4. ***Develop and Execute an Outreach Strategy:*** You've figured out the problem to be addressed and you understand who cares. Now you need to figure out how to reach them. What associations, community groups or social organizations are members of your target audience likely to participate in? Ask those groups to reach out to their members. Where are they likely to get information online? Some well-placed blog entries, Twitter feeds, Facebook groups, or website links will boost participation, as well. But never underestimate the power of the personal ask – in person, by email or on the phone. And, staying in touch with early visitors through regular email updates will encourage repeat visits and better outcomes.

Reality Check

You've built a great community. You found great organizations and started a campaign that went viral. Thousands of people contributed ideas, commented on others, and voted for the best. What now? There are two maxims that will tempt you. The first is "majority wins"; the second is "the wisdom of the crowd." After all, people did "vote," didn't they? And everyone was welcome on the site, right?

First, remember that you have not put issues to the vote of the entire U.S. population, nor have you conducted a representative poll. The people not included were (1) people who either had no physical access to the technology or who did not have the skill and fluency to participate competently and comfortably; and (2) people who did not belong to the networks that you used to mobilize participation or didn't understand the relevance of your work to their own concerns. Don't assume that the people who participated can speak on behalf of those who did not.

Second, remember that governance is the job of government, and as government leaders you can't delegate your responsibilities to the crowd. You still need to sift and analyze, and ultimately make decisions about what will work in the operating environment as you know it, how to prioritize the many ideas and options that emerged, and, of course, whether the resources are available and the expense is worth the investment. There is much good that comes from collaboration, but in the words of an earlier president, "the buck stops here."

A New Era of Civic Engagement

As Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano recently observed, "We are a nation of more than 300 million. More than that, we're a nation of families, communities, organizations, of cities, suburbs, tribes, and all of their local governments and organizations. And within these groupings lies an extraordinary pool of talent, ingenuity and strength."

The President has called on government to tap the extraordinary pool of talent that is our nation. There lies the true promise of civic engagement: a public that is substantively engaged in the important issues of our day, and a government that is in touch with the ideas and priorities of the public it serves. The challenge is not choosing the "right" technology solution. The challenge is – as it always has been – building durable, engaged communities that will work hand-in-hand with government to find new solutions to the problems of our time.

Lena Trudeau is a Vice President of the National Academy of Public Administration, and oversaw the four online public dialogues conducted for the federal government in fiscal year 2009. Frank Reeder is a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration and President of the Reeder Group.

Believable Change: A Reality Check on Online Participation

By Jed Miller
Revenue Watch Institute

To be effective, Internet professionals navigate between two dangerous currents: dismissal and utopianism. The challenges of dismissal are pretty obvious—the boss who forgets to invite you to the meeting, or the subtler demotion of online work to a pure marketing function.

The risks of utopianism are harder to see, but the danger is just as great: If we overstate how online tools can change the world, we ask our clients and colleagues to sail on faith into uncharted waters and we risk losing allies in the daily work that makes change a reality over time.

The Obama Administration arrived on a surge of optimism about online partnerships between citizens and government. As excitement transitions into a season of experimentation, Internet professionals, government professionals and regular people face important questions about the readiness of tools, institutions and individuals to turn optimism into operational change.

Beth Noveck, White House Deputy CTO for Open Government, is leading the effort to rethink public participation. She says the administration wants "to make government more relevant to people's lives" by providing more information, and to create "opportunities for people to share their expertise and participate in solving problems."

Noveck believes that transparency and participation tools are most powerful when combined. "Data helps to focus people's attention," she says, "to develop actionable proposals based in empirical measures." Noveck and the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) have already coordinated web discussions on declassification policy, FCC rules, use of web cookies, Pentagon Web 2.0 guidelines and recommendations on the Open Government Initiative.

Despite the innovation—and fanfare—behind the White House pilots in transparency and public input, leaders in online collaboration temper their enthusiasm with questions.

On TechPresident.com, co-founder Micah Sifry complained about the open government discussion that "the very topic we are being asked for input on isn't one that most people think about every day." In its busiest phase, that discussion drew about 1,000 suggestions and nearly 21,000 readers, according to the National Academy of Public Administration. For an online policy dialogue, that's a big success, but as a harbinger of a new era of digital citizenship it's a modest beginning at best.

The Obama campaign showed how digital tools can fuse the personal touch of local organizing with the powerful message of a national candidate and create a large, mobilized, virtual community, but online strategist Brian Reich is still looking for signs that Barack Obama the president can make the political personal as deftly as

Getting 13 million people to agree to pull the lever on one day for one guy is very different than getting 13 million people to agree on what healthcare reform should be...

Obama the candidate made the personal political. "Obama did that extraordinarily well during the campaign because it was decentralized," says Reich, who is also a former staffer to Vice President Al Gore, "but the White House is the ultimate top-down communications vehicle."

The traditional polarity of governance is not the only challenge to grassroots engagement by the White House. The pace and the detail of federal policy-making are ill-suited to creating the momentum of a winning political campaign. "Getting 13 million people to agree to pull the lever on one day for one guy is very different than getting 13 million people to agree on what healthcare reform should be," says Andrew Rasiej, founder of Personal Democracy Forum and an advisor on transparency to the Obama transition team.

One way to refine a clutter of online opinions into themes is to use tools that "let the community do the filtering," says David Stern, founder of MixedInk, one of the flagship systems OSTP is using to add structure and prioritization to its online policy forums. But Stern says the value of the

process depends in part on the number of participants. "In order to have a wise crowd, you need a crowd," he says, "and the bigger the crowd, the wiser it is."

The buzzword "crowdsourcing" conjures an image of a vast group whose diverse views are refined by technology into a shared purpose. Thus far, however, OSTP has convened brain trusts, not crowds—modest-sized niche discussions among experts or interested non-experts. Noveck acknowledges and seems to welcome this. The ambitions for Open Government may be sweeping, but Noveck says, "This is not about inviting everybody and anybody to participate in a conversation about transparency policy," or any single issue. "The goal is not to have millions of people. The goal is to create many, many opportunities for people to participate around the interests that engage them."

Echoing Noveck, Reich says, "We need to stop looking at technology as a facilitator for giant things, and instead look at it as a facilitator for hundreds of millions of little things." Even as government demonstrates a new commitment to civic engagement, and technology evolves to provide new tools, some leaders insist that permanent change, if it comes, must come offline and beyond the Beltway: in life as it's lived locally.

For author and speaker Rich Harwood, hope is the central theme in revitalizing community life and "public innovation," but he grows severe when asked how the White House can most effectively promote participation. "I don't think we want a president dictating what engagement questions we're going to be wrestling with. If you think that's sufficient, we're in big trouble." Harwood is looking for the White House not only to reach out with national-level questions, but also to "catalyze the distributed capacity" of communities, organizations and individuals so they can grow "from consumers to citizens to active participants."

According to Columbia University law professor Eben Moglen, when relevant public information can reach interested people with sufficient structure, "government learns it has users." A longtime champion in the free software movement, Moglen says that if government provides usable data "without platformizing it or productizing it," then people will engage "not in some Platonic way, but at the fish market, in the schools, in the places where they want to take action."

Moglen is also an unrelenting realist about the potential of corporate structures to block progress. Traditional government software contractors, he says, "have never had to make a good program because they never made a program for anybody who had a choice of any kind about anything."

Speaking from inside the bureaucracy, Noveck is more moderate about the institutional challenges. She says resistance from federal employees, if it comes, comes not in dismissal but in "a lack of familiarity with the new tools and techniques for obtaining input," and "a concern whether it's doable to get meaningful, structured input" that is not "unmanageable" or "garbage."

Our culture of instant punditry can make it hard to see the difference between innovation and transformation. Real change happens not at the speed of a website launch or an election night, but at the organic, often maddening, pace of institutions and behaviors.

Moglen compares the emergence of new tools and personalizable data streams to the invention and mass production of the automobile. "It's okay to require a generation to learn how to drive," he says.

Furthermore, the change we've been waiting for may not be monolithic but, to quote organizers like Reich and Harwood, decentralized. Rasiej doesn't claim to know which tools will take participation to the next level, but he says the usable information on sites like Data.gov will allow a hundred projects to emerge.

Noveck, herself a career evangelist of "little-d" democracy, is the first to rein in breathless claims about a new age. "I don't think we're there yet," she says from the hub of the new experiment. "It's too soon."

We should remember that it took 20 or 30 years for the Internet itself to evolve from a small government project into a ubiquitous platform that has permanently transformed public life.

Jed Miller is Internet director at the Revenue Watch Institute and a contributing blogger for Personal Democracy Forum. He was previously director of Internet programs at the American Civil Liberties Union.

The virtual front porch leads to face-to-face dialogue within small groups.

Reinventing "We the People"

By P.K. Agarwal
Chief Technology Officer
California Department of Technology Services
State of California

"You have to remember one thing about the will of the people: it wasn't that long ago that we were swept away by the Macarena."

Jon Stewart
"The Daily Show"

2008 will prove to be a watershed year in the evolution of the relationship between government and information technology. In 2008, the Obama campaign rewrote the book on campaigning, with its innovative use of IT and the Internet. Henceforth, the business of elections has changed forever. If a candidate does not understand IT, he or she will not get elected – period. The Obama administration hasn't stopped there, however. The lessons learned during the campaign are being morphed into tools to change the business of governance in some groundbreaking ways.

Some very interesting historical parallels can be drawn to the current evolution of IT and the Internet. Historically, every medium's commercial success has been followed by its successful adoption by a public figure. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler and John F. Kennedy built upon the commercial successes of radio, movies, and television, respectively, to the get their messages to the masses.

Radio's commercial success in the 1920s and '30s prompted FDR to grasp its potential value to government, and he seized on this potential with his "fireside chats" during the Great Depression. Movies matured as a medium during the '40s and '50s, and it was Hitler who capitalized on the medium's power for propaganda

purposes. Television came of age during the '60s and '70s, and it was Kennedy, followed by Ronald Reagan, who understood how to harness its power. Similarly, the Obama campaign understood the power of IT and the Internet, and used them successfully for fundraising and engaging the populace during the 2008 presidential campaign. The lessons learned during the campaign are now being transferred into the business of government to foster civic engagement and transparency.

To date, the Obama administration has used IT to enable civic engagement and foster transparency in three ways. The first, I would dub "the virtual town square," or the crowdsourcing model, which engages a large number of people in public deliberation. This is also being labeled the "idea jam." This software-driven process allows people to provide ideas, review and comment on the ideas of others, and vote ideas up or down — thus creating a group ranking of ideas. The second model is what I call the "virtual front porch," which engages individual neighborhoods in public discussion. The outcome of this software-driven process is a face-to-face meeting among people in a small geographical area, typically a ZIP code. The software tools allow users to search for a meeting (or a party) in their neighborhood or express their interest in hosting one around a specific issue. The third model is that of electronic petitions — websites that enable users to create, circulate, and sign a petition on issues of interest to them.

The Obama campaign used the virtual town square approach during the election (barackobama.com) to gather ideas and during the transition (change.gov; Citizens Briefing Book) to get a pulse on the issues in the minds of the people. Subsequently, the virtual town square was used for a national dialogue on IT solutions, which yielded 542 productive ideas related to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. In March 2009, the White House became open for questions, soliciting questions for the president in 11 categories, including healthcare, the auto industry, green jobs, and budgets. This effort produced more than 100,000 questions, which garnered close to 2 million votes. Subsequently, the president answered the top ranking questions in a Web conference. Ironically, the highest ranking question pertained to the legalization of marijuana, proving that well-organized campaigns work no matter what the medium. In May 2009, an open government dialogue was launched. This effort collected ideas on how to make government more transparent, participatory, and collaborative. In this effort, the idea-gathering stage was followed by a discussion phase, and then a policy formulation stage.

The front porch model was used during the campaign for organizing unmediated house parties (Mybo.com) followed by the first lady's effort to get people to talk about national service. More recently, it has been used for neighborhood-level discussion and debate on health care issues. The whole idea behind this approach is to encourage people to look to themselves and their neighbors to solve the problems of the community and the nation.

Both of the models discussed above are inside-out or government-sponsored in design. Electronic petitions are outside-in and are also getting a lot of attention. A number of electronic petition Web sites (e.g. petitionsonline.com) allow one to start a petition or sign a petition. It is too early for these petitions to have a legal standing, but the mere fact that a large number of people would sign a petition conveys a message. As an example, a petition was started requesting the Obama administration to create the position of a secretary of the arts. Within the first six weeks of the start of this petition, more than 200,000 people had signed it. These electronic petitions hold the promise of replacing the current process for getting propositions on the ballot once electronic identities become legally binding.

In the infancy of all mass media, including radio, movies, and television, a utopian vision of societal transformation would result from the medium's potential to spread information and knowledge. However, that vision has generally never materialized. Is the Internet headed for the same fate? I think not, because the Internet is unique in that it provides for direct people-to-people communication without the need for center. All other media prior to the Internet were either one-to-many (broadcast) or one-to-one (personal communication such as telegraph or telephone).

To summarize, the virtual town square approach is well-suited for gathering ideas and building consensus around popular ideas. The virtual front porch allows for local empowerment and leads to face-to-face dialogue within small groups. Electronic petitions are a powerful emerging tool for the voices of the people to be heard. The rapid evolution of mobile appliances and wireless technologies will further enhance this agenda of civic engagement and government transparency.

The next few years should provide for considerable innovation in the use of IT in government and the remaking of the institutions of democracy. It is exciting to be living in this age of transformation.

P.K. Agarwal is the Chief Technology Officer for the State of California. For additional information contact P.K.Agarwal@dts.ca.gov.

Data is Not Democracy

By Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer
President/Founder
America*Speaks*

Technology and data are critical to the expansion of open government, but where participation is concerned, will anything truly replace the power of meeting face to face?

The U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy is driving President Obama's Open Government Initiative full-speed ahead. Thousands of Americans have added their ideas and opinions to this groundbreaking online effort, which will help form the overall recommendations for input and openness in the federal government.

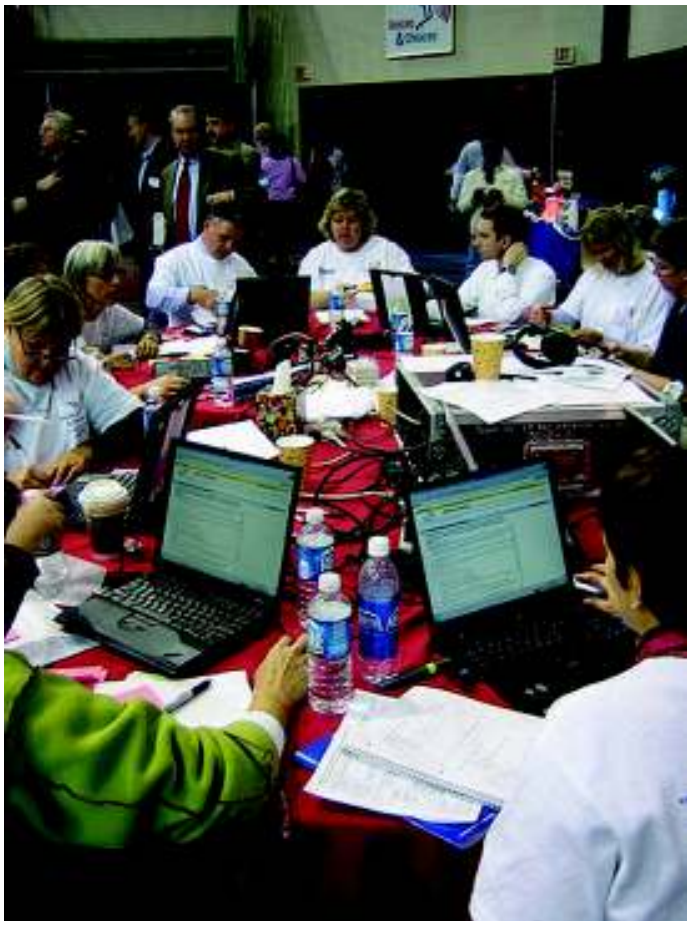
While the Open Government Initiative rightly places significant emphasis on transparency and shows the possibilities of online action, the potential power of this effort to specifically increase citizen participation, both online and in person, should not be overlooked or underestimated. Democratizing data answers the need for access but does not answer the need for the citizen's voice in governance. Our collective voice made American democracy unique when it was created, and now is the time to evolve our structures at all levels, revolutionizing the way we conduct the public's business.

Towards Universal Broadband Access

Despite America's lamentable ranking as No. 15 worldwide in the adoption of broadband Internet technologies, broadband adoption continues to expand. A June 2009 Pew study showed a full 63 percent of Americans with current access to high-speed Internet; up from 55 percent in 2008. President Obama is devoted to continuing these trends and closing the international gap. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act sets aside a whopping $7.2 billion to promote broadband adoption in low-income communities.

Democracy Moves Online

Expanding broadband access means increasing social interaction. Increasing amounts of online activity are finding their way into high-quality, high-touch online communications. Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter each boast subscriber bases in excess of 100 million. Local governments and agencies provide an increasing volume of data and transactional services online, ranging from paying parking tickets, to raw data at data.gov, to the deep and broad range of services offered through GSA's portal at http://www.gsa.gov/citizen/services.shtml. The Obama campaign's groundbreaking use of Internet-based social networking demolished any doubts of the intersection of technology, government and politics. MyBarackObama.com mobilized millions of volunteers and supporters, and helped to raise more than half a billion dollars online.



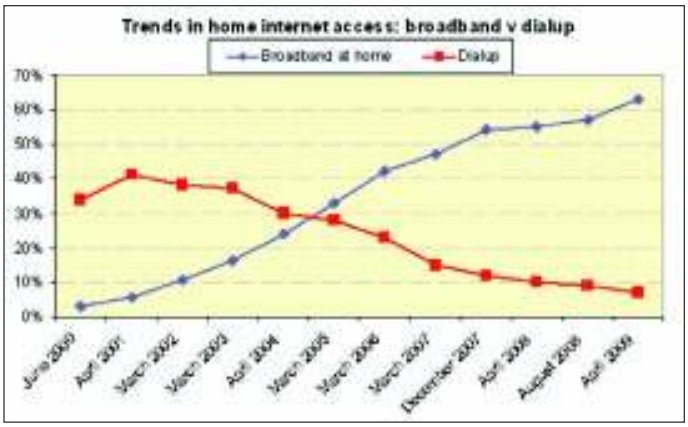
The 21st Century Town Meeting links technology with face-to-face discussion so that thousands of people can express a shared message to decision-makers.

These currents and thousands like them are rewriting both history and conventional wisdom. Politics, democracy, and governance will henceforth include online participation. Americans are eager to get involved.

Data Democracy and Its Discontents

As the data and processes of politics and government become more available to Americans hungry for involvement, the Open Government Initiative is taking a brave step beyond transactional government toward authentic empowerment. As with any new era, there are significant dangers and new discoveries to be made.

Initially, Open Government Initiative comments were populated with suggestions from citizens and interest groups keen to play a valuable role in the discussion. Once the openness of the forum became known, however, things



became a bit unruly. For example, a vicious and indefatigable crew of radicals clogged the site calling for full disclosure of the president's birth certificate and doubting his right to serve in the office.

In subsequent phases of the initiative, these voices were mitigated. The requirements for discussion became much steeper, and simple technical features such as the ability to link only to subject areas and not specific comments created a demotivator for what is known in online parlance as the "noisy idiot problem."

Still, this is one instance of the problems that arise in online deliberation, and which may stand in the way as the online seeks to become more democratic and as democracy seeks to move progressively more online.

Lessons From the Field

America has a rich tradition of bringing people together in town meetings to grapple with critical public decisions. Online engagement would seem a natural progression for this tradition, but there are many pitfalls. Beyond the example above, other questions arise: Will decision-makers include public voices in their deliberations? How can an open process account for demographic diversity?

Lessons from one organization may show a pathway to addressing these and other issues. The 21st Century Town Meeting convened by the nonprofit America*Speaks* is a public forum that links technology with small-group, face-to-face dialogue to allow many people to deliberate simultaneously about complex public policy issues and express a shared message to decision-makers.

Through a combination of keypad polling, groupware computers, large-screen projection, teleconferencing and other technologies, these town meetings enable people to simultaneously partake in intimate discussions and contribute to the collective wisdom of a large group. These meetings have been used to successfully allow communities to discuss such diverse issues as the prioritizing of efforts after Hurricane Katrina; allowing the public to make decisions on the disposition of New York's ground zero; and setting a course for the future of health care in California.

Rules of Engagement

The success of America*Speaks*' work can be ascribed to a set of core principles that underlie all of its citizen-engagement activities and set them apart from other approaches:

1. **Diverse representation** ensures that the full community is represented in the process.
2. **Informed participation** provides participants with highly accessible materials that neutrally frame the issues and provide a baseline of information to begin discussions.
3. **Facilitated deliberation** makes certain all voices are heard and that each participant plays an active role in the deliberations.
4. **Shared priorities** are the endgame, so the process is designed to foster a high level of agreement among participants' common priorities.
5. **Links to action** are the backbone of civic participation, requiring active involvement from decision-makers and key leaders throughout a project.
6. **Large scale meetings** (500 to 5,000 participants) enable the outcomes to have greater visibility and credibility with policy-makers, the media, key stakeholders, and the public as a whole.
7. **Sustaining citizen engagement** in the policymaking process – through opportunities to take action – develops civic leadership and enhances implementation of public priorities.

These principles are harnessed by America*Speaks*' 21st Century Town Meeting process and are ready to be deployed in a broader, face-to-face or online mix.

Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer is Founder and President of AmericaSpeaks, a U.S.-based nonprofit that develops and implements innovative deliberative tools.

Working Together to Build a Stronger Democracy

During the summer of 2009, America*Speaks*, Demos, Everyday Democracy and Harvard's Ash Institute convened more than 80 advocates to develop a set of recommendations for advancing the democracy reform movement. Participants included advocates and scholars from the fields of public deliberation, electoral reform, transparency, community problem solving, media reform, public service, and community organizing, as well as champions of participation from the federal government. Joining too were key representatives from the Administration, including the Office of Public Engagement, the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Justice.

Here is a brief synopsis of the group's final report including recommendations, goals and next steps.

GOALS	NEXT STEPS
1. Involve the American public in meaningful deliberations about important policy questions	
Build capacity in government and in society to involve the American public in regular and meaningful deliberations about important policy questions	Demonstrate the value and efficacy of public deliberation by organizing opportunities for broad cross-sections of Americans to deliberate and express views on issues of national importance
2. Support and promote an electoral reform agenda	
Support and promote comprehensive electoral reform	Eliminate unnecessary barriers to voter participation
3. Improve Federal Public Participation and Collaboration	
Make permanent improvements in federal public participation, collaboration, and transparency activities through an executive order and legislation	Reaffirm and institutionalize participatory and collaborative governance in the federal government
4. Explore Lessons from the Open Government Dialogue	
Advise government agencies on best practices for soliciting public input and participation	Leverage the knowledge and resources of the participation and information access
5. Recognize and Support Engagement Carried Out by Traditionally Disenfranchised Communities	
Ensure that the engagement practices of traditionally disenfranchised groups are highlighted and supported	Learn from and support innovative forms of engagement
6. Create a Report on the Health of our Democracy	
Create a Health of our Democracy Report	Measure the level of civic and democratic health by tracking hard and soft indicators over time
7. Build Skills and Capacity for Public Engagement	
Increase the capacity of the public and of public officials to participate meaningfully in governance	Build skills, knowledge, and expectations necessary for the public to exercise democratic practices
8. Increase the Availability of Federal Funding for Democratic Participation	
Identify and make available sources of federal funding	Ensure adequate resources for public engagement in federal programs.
9. Convene an International Democracy Conference	
Convene an international democracy conference for policymakers and advocates	Learn about innovative and alternative ways that people are working to strengthen democracy throughout the world
10. Create an Ongoing Mechanism for Sustaining Leadership	
Create an ongoing infrastructure to ensure all constituencies of the democracy movement can collaborate and communicate with the Administration and leaders in other branches and levels of government	Create a "point" organization for the Administration to use as a sounding board and mechanism to open up an ongoing and deeper conversation

Could Citizens Run the White House Online?

By Jim Gilliam
Founder
WhiteHouse2.org

Shortly before the 2008 election, I started a website, WhiteHouse2.org, to imagine how the White House could work if it was run democratically by thousands of citizens over the Internet. I was excited about the potential for citizen engagement that an upgraded WhiteHouse.gov could bring, but I knew there were all kinds of restrictions on what they could do, both legally and culturally. I figured if I could show thousands of citizens actively and enthusiastically engaged in a non-partisan political forum online, it could push the official efforts in that direction, and the techniques could be used for many government sites.

The main power of the modern White House is to set the agenda, so at WhiteHouse2.org, everyone sets their own list of priorities, and the computer compiles everyone's into one list and ranks them as if it were the Billboard music charts or the Nielsen TV ratings. This is different than just voting, as it forces people to really think about what matters to them most. Every time they put something on their list, it means something else is pushed down.

There have been many challenges in making WhiteHouse2.org work. Here are a few, and how I am addressing them.

Finding Good Contributions

Amazon.com is known for its product reviews. People are asked at the end of each review whether it was helpful or not; the most helpful reviews are shown on the main product page. White House 2 uses the same technique for talking points, which are short reasons for or against an individual priority.

The problem is that whichever talking points have been around the longest end up getting the most votes. When someone writes a new talking point, it's not enough to just ask if it is helpful, we need to ask if it is more helpful than each of the existing ones.

Tennis has a solution to this problem. They have to rank thousands of people, and give newcomers some chance to rise to the top. So they use a ladder. If you beat someone higher than you on the ladder, you move up, and vice versa.

So make finding the best talking point a game by putting two side by side in a duel, and asking which one is better.

Encouraging Good Contributions

How do you encourage people to write helpful talking points? White House 2 has its own economic model that uses a currency called political capital. It is shamelessly stolen from massively multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft, and modeled after how political capital works in real life. Famously, former President Bush earned

political capital by winning the 2004 election, and spent it unsuccessfully trying to privatize Social Security.

You earn "pc" by writing talking points people find helpful, bringing in new members, when people follow you, things like that. You can spend it buying ads for the homepage to promote your priorities.

Now there's a positive feedback loop: I have an idea, I can post it, I can write talking points explaining why it is a good idea, I earn political capital if people find those helpful, and then I can spend it promoting my idea on the home page.

Like priorities, everyone understands money, so it is a very simple tool that can be used in countless ways to encourage good contributions. Imagine if instead trying to get money out of politics, we flooded it with a new kind of money, one that is earned by people being better citizens and by helping their community.

Crazy Ideas

President Obama is doing much of what he said he would, so those priorities are coming off the list, and what is left are a lot of things that will never happen. That is not useful.

Here we can learn something from the stock market. It is possible to predict a date by letting people bet their political capital on when it will happen. Then we can re-sort the list. Imagine a "wisdom of the crowds" calendar for the White House agenda.

Noisy Idiots

A perennial challenge in any political forum is how to deal with disruptive influences. At WhiteHouse2.org, there is one primary rule: no personal attacks. You can attack an idea, but not the person suggesting it. If someone violated this rule, I used to send them a note asking them to stop. This did not work. In the heat of an argument, some would still lash out personally, quickly making the whole discussion useless. So I created a four-step process. Anyone could flag a comment as violating the rules, and if I agreed, the offending person received a warning explaining the rules and the four-step process. If it happened again, they would lose a small amount of political capital. On the third violation, they would lose a lot of political capital and were not allowed to participate for a week. Finally, the fourth step was expulsion.

A funny thing happened. I issued several warnings, and all the problem people left in a huff. I never needed to go to step 2.

Balancing Competing Interests

The founding fathers created three branches of government as a way to provide checks and balances, to ensure no one branch had too much power. Like Executive, Judiciary, and Legislative, we can use "branches" to group constituencies with different goals.

This is easiest to understand in the context of a corporation. Shareholders want the stock price to go up, employees want salaries to go up, and customers want prices to go down. There might be a hundred thousand customers, but only a couple hundred employees. It is not fair for customers to completely dominate the agenda, but by grouping people into branches, we can track whether an idea is more important to customers, shareholders, or employees and make better decisions.

How Do We Get More People Involved?

Make it simple and fun. At WhiteHouse2.org, all you have to do at first is make your list of priorities. Everyone understands a to-do list. People who want to do more, can write talking points, start discussions, earn political capital, and buy ads.

The most important thing by far is simply to show people their efforts have an impact. I have been dismayed at some of the priorities at WhiteHouse2.org. For example, #382 is "Admit Government Can Fix Nothing; Can Only Make Worse." There is a big opportunity for people in government to connect with citizens, and show that government can fix their problems.

In the United Kingdom, a government-sanctioned e-petitions site for the Prime Minister put together by MySociety, a non-profit, got 10 percent of the UK population involved. A similar site, approved by President Obama could attract 20 million people in a year.

Jim Gilliam is the founder of http:||www.Whitehouse2.org and of the technology platform behind it. For additional information contact jim@gilliam.com.

E-Petitions Preserves an Old British Tradition

There is a well-established tradition of British citizens presenting petitions at the door of Number 10 Downing Street, the home and office of the Prime Minister. Since November 2006, they have been able to deliver those petitions online, at http:||petitions.number10.gov.uk, and more than 10.5 million signatures have been delivered on nearly 63,000 e-petitions.

According to the website, "the e-petition system has been designed to be transparent and trustworthy. For legal and anti-spam reasons this site cannot host every petition submitted, but the rule is to accept everything that meets the terms and conditions of use," and "no petition will be rejected unless it violates these terms...[E]ven when petitions cannot be hosted, No10 will still publish as much of rejected petitions as is consistent with legal and anti-spam requirements, including the reason why it could not be hosted."

Frequently Asked Questions posted on the E-Petitions site describe the workings of this system, which is said to be the largest-ever non-partisan democracy site by number of users. Here are some excerpts.

Petition signing questions

What is an e-petition?

An e-petition is a form of petition posted on a website. Individuals or groups can create a petition on the site and visitors can add their details to the petition to "sign" it. The format makes it easy to collect signatures, and it also makes it easier for us to respond directly using email.

What's the difference between an e-petition and a paper petition?

There is no theoretical difference, only the way in which the signatures are collected and delivered. A petition can gather names and addresses in either or both forms, though once someone has signed a petition in one format, they cannot sign it in another.

Petition signing questions

How do I sign a petition?

To sign a petition, you will need to give your name, address and email on the form provided. Once you have signed the petition, you will receive an email asking you to confirm that you wish to add your name to the petition by clicking a link. Once you have done this, your name will be added to the petition.

What will you do with my name and address details if I sign a petition?

Nothing, unless you expressly ask to sign up for other services available on the Downing Street website (e.g., email updates). We will use your email address to confirm your signature and, unless you ask us not to, we will also send you a maximum of two responses to the issues raised in the petition. In the future we may introduce a facility to

enable the creator of the petition to send you a maximum of two emails as well.... The data themselves are not held by the Prime Minister's Office or any other government bodies or agencies.

More than one person shares my email address — can we sign the petition?

I'm afraid that there is a trade-off to be made between allowing anyone to sign the petitions regardless of having an email address, and protecting the petitions from too much abuse. We have come down on the side of using one email address per person to act as an anti-abuse mechanism because it is now possible for anyone to get an email address for free in a few moments. On the converse, if we let people use one address to sign multiple times we will likely see considerable fake signatures almost straight away.

Why not "sign against" petitions?

Many people have suggested changes to the e-petitions service during this test phase, and a number of improvements have been made as a result.

One of the most popular proposals has been the creation of a 'sign against' mechanism, which would allow users to disagree with petitions. After much discussion, we have decided not to add this function.

The rationale is this: "e-petitions" is designed essentially as a modern equivalent of the traditional petitions presented at the door of No.10. It enables people to put their views to the Prime Minister. It is not intended to be a form of quasi-referendum or unrepresentative opinion poll (professional polls use special techniques to ensure balanced samples). With a "vote against" function, that is what it would effectively become.

It is of course possible to create a counter-petition to an existing campaign (as many people already have). This remains the best option if you disagree with a particular petition.

Petition creation questions

How do I start an e-petition?

You can start a petition using our e-petition form. You will be asked to provide some basic information about yourself and your petition. We aim to make your petition live on the website within five working days, although during busy periods it may take longer.

Do you accept all petitions?

We aim to accept as many petitions as possible. However this site has to meet standards that are set out in our terms and conditions and in the Civil Service Code.

Petitioners may freely disagree with the Government or call for changes of policy. There will be no attempt to exclude critical views and decisions to accept or reject will not be made on a party political basis.

What happens if my petition is rejected?

If your petition does not meet these criteria, we will send it back to you along with an explanation of the reason(s) for rejection. We will give you the option of altering and resubmitting the petition.

If you decide not to resubmit your petition, or if your second iteration is also rejected, we will list your petition and the reason(s) for not accepting it on this website.

Can I still send in a paper petition?

Yes. Paper petitions can still be posted/delivered to Downing Street. If you would prefer to collect signatures on paper, you should send them to:

10 Downing Street London SW1A 2AA

How long will my petition run for?

You can decide how long your petition can run for and we will carry it for up to 12 months.

What will happen to my petition once it is finished?

Once your petition has closed, usually provided there are 500 signatures or more, it will be passed to officials who work for the Prime Minister in Downing Street, or sent to the relevant Government department for a response.

Every person who signs such a petition will receive an email detailing the Government's response to the issues raised.

Organisational questions

Why have you set up this service?

We are offering this service to enable as many people as possible to make their views known to the Government. The service will enable smaller groups who may not have the funds to set up a website to still collect signatures online. It also will enable us to respond directly to those who have signed the petition online via email.

Can I make my own petitions site?

Yes, the software behind this petitions site is open source, and available to you under the GNU Affero GPL software license. You can download the source code (look under 'pet') and help us develop it. You're welcome to use it in your own projects, although you must also make available the source code to any such projects.

A view of the city of Tallinn, Estonia.

My *better* Estonia

By Hille Hinsberg
State Chancellery
Republic of Estonia

My Estonia is a civic initiative designed to find creative and effective solutions to the country's problems, in times of recession, and, on the other hand, to find new community leaders to implement these ideas. The initiative is based on the belief that a more coherent and efficient society is built on citizens' ideas and actions, both bold and small.

May 1 is a notorious date for all nations that used to belong to Soviet Union. This day was once dedicated to global solidarity of the working class (the proletariat). In reality, the regime was deviating from all democratic values, so the government-led mass celebrations in honour of the day were forced and insincere.

In 2009, solidarity was once again in the minds and hearts of ordinary people in Estonia. On May 1, the word regained meaning, when more than 11,000 people (among a nation of 1.3 million) convened on brainstorming sessions to discuss common problems and support each other in achieving common goals. The slogan of the initiative read: "Thinking Together for a Better Estonia."

Notions such as solidarity, democracy,or even civil society need to be put into practice to reveal their true value. Belief in the common good is important, but what is most needed is momentum to bring democracy alive.

"Our main aim is to increase understanding among people, bring the state closer to citizens and solicit them to become actively involved in improving their lives instead of passively hoping that someone else will do it," said Estonian ICT entrepreneur Rainer Nolvak, one of the main organizers of the My Estonia initiative.

For this purpose, organizers provided 400 think tanks in cultural centers, schools and other popular institutions. Trained volunteer discussion leaders moderated the panel. Brainstorming was based on the open space deliberation method, designed to create a space and time for people to gather around issues that matter to them – immediate concerns that may need a simple or creative solution. Open space has been used in diverse cultures and circumstances around the world, to facilitate productive meetings from five to 2,000 plus people, and to encourage people to organize themselves and take responsibility for solving problems.

Discussions were simultaneously held online and later linked to the central website, the pledge bank. Brainstorming sessions were also organized by Estonian communities in 12 other countries.

Analysis of brainstorming results is under way. Within a few months, organizers hope to get a thematically grouped list of development scenarios that can be applied in everyday life. Ideas and solutions range from better governance to innovative child care services. Projects will be discussed in further workshops; discussions are planned for airing on national television. Some community initiatives were started on the spot and have been implemented. Other will be implemented in association with nongovernmental organizations, enterprises, or government agencies.

The My Estonia initiative was built on the success of a massive garbage collection campaign in 2008, which united 50,000 volunteers to collect 10,000 metric tons of illegally dumped garbage during one day.

The success of both campaigns proved that people are

ready to commit themselves for the well-being of society. It generated trust that the voice of citizen counts.

My Estonia is a grass-roots movement towards better society. What kind of systems are in place by public administration to support democracy and develop stronger civil society?

Engaging interest groups in drafting legislation and preparing policy documents is not mandatory under Estonian law. However, elements for engaging interest groups can be found in the constitution, rules of the government of the republic, and legislative drafting rules of the government and the Parliament. These elements point out that legislative drafting must be open and understandable for citizens, and enable active participation.

Since the basic legal framework is in place, the public is more and more interested in observing how involvement works in practice: whether all affected groups have been involved in policymaking, whether the dialogue is substantial and if an agreement is reached regarding decisions.

In recent years, a systematic approach has been taken by the central government related to enhancing public participation in policymaking. The latter is obviously interrelated with the growth of civil society, voicing strongly the ideals of participatory democracy.

An important foundation for e-democracy was established by the Public Information Act at the beginning of 2001. The act obliged all public institutions to create websites and to provide extensive online content of public interest, including drafts of policy documents and legislative acts. Providing information about activities of public institutions is an important prerequisite of transparent and accountable government.

Several important processes for democratic development have stemmed from approving the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept approved by Parliament in 2002. It is a strategic document defining the mutually complementary roles, mechanisms and priorities of public administration and civic initiative.

In 2005, a Code of Good Practice on Involvement was developed by representatives of public sector and civil society organizations, elaborating the key principles that support active and meaningful participation of CSOs and the wider public. The code suggests principles that should be incorporated into the policy planning process.

Key people have been appointed in line ministries, whose direct responsibilities include involving the public in decision-making processes. These civil servants supervise the implementation of the Code of Good Practice on Involvement in their respective agencies, and advise both government officials and civil society organizations in the matters of involvement.

The government's central participation portal, www.osale.ee, was launched in 2007, allowing interest groups and individuals to post comments about drafts of policy documents. The summaries of public consultations on this website are included in the consecutive drafts for legislative acts.

As a separate function, citizens can make their own proposals to the government, for better regulation or simply to improve acute problems. The Website enables people to gain a better understanding of the aims and routines of administrative agencies, which can gauge the expectations of the public better.

For example, when preparing the National Health Development Plan, the Ministry of Social Affairs set an objective to map the factors affecting health by involving the public and asking what everybody could do for their own health.

Estonia, once a part of the Soviet Union, regained independence in 1991 and joined the EU and NATO in 2004. Situated on the coast of the Baltic Sea, the country has 1.3 million inhabitants. It has become a pioneer in ICT services, e-government and cyber-defence systems.

According to the civil servants in the Ministry of Social Affairs, the consultation was lively and emotional, with a varied scale of opinions presented. The development plan was amended drastically in two years, based on public input, and in its final version, it definitely reflects the opinions of the public.

The government needs to acknowledge the citizens' voice, either in the form of results from a brainstorming session or mediated by civil society organizations. The government also continues to systematically build the scene for participation, by offering tools for better policymaking and decision processes, developing the skills of civil servants etc.

Regardless of the administrative level, development of democracy requires common understanding of the aims for a better society, as well as horizontal and vertical cooperation across and between the levels and spheres of administration.

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Participatory Lawmaking in Brazil

By Cristiano Faria and Tiago Peixoto
e-Democracia Project

Recently launched by the Brazilian House of Representatives, the e-Democracia project aims to engage its participants in the lawmaking process in order to achieve concrete legislative results. Relying on the use of social media, combined with offline legislative events (e.g. committee hearings, conferences), the initiative is intended to reach a broad public that includes citizens, parliamentarians, civil servants, researchers, nongovernmental organizations and interest groups. Such a program is driven by a belief that the lawmaking process can benefit from the convergence of political representation and citizen participation, in a virtuous cycle where one model strengthens the other.

The backbone of the initiative is its website. It aims to involve users in three core moments of the lawmaking process:

- The sharing of information about a problem that needs to be addressed by law;
- The identification and discussion of possible solutions to the problem; and
- The drafting of a bill itself.

As to the sharing of information, the website provides users with the possibility to upload and download resources in text, audio and video format, and the possibility to follow up on pertinent legislative action being taken at the House of Representatives. To enhance the debate among the participants, different resources are available, such as video chats, forums and customizable surveys. Users are also able to create and edit their own personal profiles and to form thematic social networks. These networks are expected to be particularly useful as a means to bring together different users across the country around a specific topic. Finally, considering that in the legislative process much of the relevant discussion takes place during the drafting of a bill itself, the website provides users with the "wikilegis" area. In this collaborative environment, users can elaborate their own version of a bill or suggest amendments to existing bills while simultaneously discussing and qualitatively evaluating bill proposals. Conceived as a free software solution, the platform may be appropriated by state and municipal legislatures as a tool to increase citizen participation in their own lawmaking processes.

The e-Democracia website was conceived to address the specific needs of the initiative. In order to learn from the merits of similar experiences around the world and to avoid repeating mistakes, preliminary studies were conducted. In this sense, the current architecture of the e-Democracia website is the fruit of the particular needs that were identified, and a careful reflection on existing solutions and preliminary testing.

The website will be a permanent work in progress, building on identified needs, user feedback, challenges and available technology. For instance, we have opted not to implement ranking systems that are used in other collaborative initiatives, where the user is shown the level of agreement that other users have expressed in relation to submitted ideas. We made this decision in order to avoid the bias that may be generated during the process in the form of a conformity effect, whereby user choices tend to be influenced by the previous judgments made by others and where early events may produce great variations in the outcome.

Bearing this in mind, we are considering alternative-choice architectures to better source input from a large number of users. For instance, we consider a system where the degree of agreement with an idea expressed by previous users (e.g., overall rating of an idea, top-rated ideas) should only be visible to a new user after he or she has passed judgment. Such a mechanism should be able to generate a redistributive effect where each idea would actually receive a similar share of visibility. In a similar vein, we are considering how argument-mapping tools could be used in the framework of the e-Democracia website. Another question under debate concerns the elaboration of a strategy to integrate the use of other tools (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) in the process, in an attempt to reach the target public in environments in which they are already interacting. Finally, we are beginning to consider how the use of mobile phones could be integrated into the initiative.

Considering the challenges involved in the implementation of such a project, the use of technology per se is far from being the only ingredient for success. Citizen involvement is essential, but it is only sustainable if the initiative allows users to have an actual voice in the decision-making process. However, in ensuring this kind of participation, numerous political, institutional and organizational variables come into play. For example, a previous commitment from Members of Parliament and from legislative staff – beyond those directly in charge of the project – is fundamental. In other words, internal support is also a key factor. Based on this assumption, at a very early

stage, a particular effort was deployed to involve – along with external stakeholders – MPs, their staff, and the servants of the House in the co-design of the initiative. Currently hosting a specific discussion regarding "The National Policy of Climate Change," the project relies on a great deal of support from the political and administrative spheres of the House. A high degree of involvement has been generated among major internal actors such as the speaker of the House himself, the Environmental Parliamentary Group, the Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, and a multitude of civil servants from different House departments. As the project is appropriated by different stakeholders, we expect that in its second phase, the e-Democracia website will be able to simultaneously host initiatives related to national and subnational lawmaking processes.

Leveraging the knowledge dispersed throughout society and bringing the Parliament closer to the citizens is by no means an easy task, and there is no silver bullet for it. We expect that the e-Democracia initiative will play its part in the Brazilian context: that of a young democracy open to innovations.

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Participatory Budgeting in Brazil and Argentina

By Tiago Peixoto, European University Institute
Guilherme Lessa, Fábrica do Futuro

Participatory budgeting can be broadly defined as the participation of citizens in the decision-making process of budget allocation and in the monitoring of public spending. In the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, participatory budgeting has received international praise as a good governance policy. In practice, it has been associated with desirable outcomes such as reduced tax delinquency, increased transparency, and better and innovative delivery of public services.

In a traditional participatory budgeting process, citizens are invited to periodic public assemblies across the city to deliberate on public resource allocations. The process presents some problems in terms of the material (e.g., paying for transport) and immaterial (e.g., time consumption) costs associated with people attending the public assemblies. These costs have often been reflected in low turnout levels, where only a small percentage of the population gets involved in the participatory budgeting initiative.

Until 2004, this had been the case for Belo Horizonte, Brazil, where participation levels stood at around 1.5 percent of the city's voters. In 2006, alongside the traditional participatory budgeting process, the city administration launched a digital participatory budgeting (e-PB)process. In addition to the budget of $43 million (USD) allocated to the traditional participatory budgeting, $11 million was assigned to the new initiative. Whereas the traditional participatory budgeting required citizens to attend meetings at a certain time and place, with e-PB, the city's electors could discuss and cast their votes online during a period of 42 days, where voting was enabled by the provision of a unique electoral register number. At the completion of the process, with a budget nearly one fourth that of traditional offline participatory budgeting, e-PB attracted more than six times more participants, with 173,000 inhabitants (10 percent of electors) taking part in the process. The winning projects, subsequently delivered to the communities, were of undeniable salience and benefit to the citizens. They included initiatives such as the renovation of transport systems and hospitals, the building of educational centers and the creation of ecological parks. In 2008, with similar success, the city repeated the process with the added possibility for citizens to vote by calling a toll-free number. However, even if lowering participation costs through the use of technology seems to address the issue of low turnout, e-PB processes such as that of Belo Horizonte have been criticized for insufficient

deliberation and, consequently, allegedly low-quality results.

In a traditional offline participatory budgeting, citizens must attend a deliberative face-to-face meeting before casting their votes. However, generally, in e-PBs, citizens can vote without meetings – which are difficult to simulate online – where individual interests are confronted with collective purposes and where community bonds are created and reinforced.

In 2009, the administration of La Plata, Argentina, launched a $4.1 million participatory budgeting initiative with a two-phase innovative design. During the first phase, 40 face-to-face deliberative meetings were held across the city, where citizens were permitted to directly allocate up to 30 percent of the total budget, and to present a list of options for the allocation of the remaining 70 percent of the budget. The second phase consisted of voting among the options selected at the deliberative meetings, where a secured system allowed votes to be cast through paper ballots, electronic ballots and text messages. As a result, during the second phase, 29,578 people participated, representing more than 10 percent of the city's voters, more participants than the first, face-to-face phase (3,200).

Such a design, where deliberation and participation levels are equally taken into account, addresses the apparent incompatibility between deliberation and high levels of participation, which is frequently highlighted by experts in the field and identified in practice. Furthermore, incentives are created for a variety of citizens – who are willing to bear diverse costs of participation – to engage in the process. By giving citizens who attend the meetings the opportunity to definitively allocate up to 30 percent of the budget and to select the options for the remaining budget to be submitted to vote in the second phase, an additional incentive for residents to attend the deliberative stage of the process is created. The second phase creates an opportunity for a broader section of the population to participate in the process, by voting between options that are the fruit of a previous deliberative process that is equally open to all citizens.

It is well-known that trust in a participatory process is a determinant of citizen participation. In this respect, one can hypothesize that a process with large-scale participation and lowered costs may become an entry point to more sophisticated and costly models of engagement. For instance, taking part in a participatory budgeting process by simply casting a vote through text messages (i.e. low-cost participation) that has a clear impact on the decision-making process may generate increased trust in the process. Consequently, citizens may be more inclined to attend the face-to-face deliberative stage the next time. This could be particularly pertinent if a more proactive approach is taken, for example by sending a text message to citizens who vote using a cell phone, inviting them to attend subsequent face-to-face participatory budgeting assemblies.

...incentives are created for a variety of citizens – who are willing to bear diverse costs of participation – to engage in the process.

Despite its infancy, e-participatory budgeting is starting to provide compelling evidence of being one of the few electronic democracy initiatives with the potential to deliver on its promises. Preferences involving online and offline activities, the enabling of different levels of engagement (e.g., sending a text message or attending a meeting) and the use of mobile technology are some of the paths being explored. Further developments in the domain are to be followed closely by those interested in the use of Information and Communication Technology for citizen engagement.

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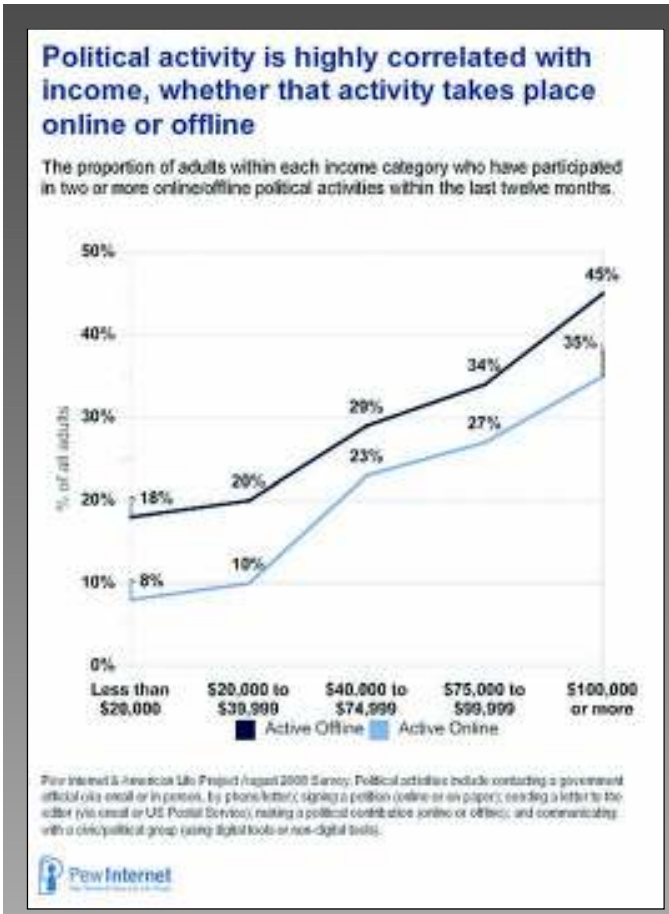
Pew: Well-off and Well-educated Are More Likely to Engage

By the Pew Internet and American Life Project

Just as in offline politics, the well-off and well-educated are especially likely to participate in online activities that mirror offline forms of engagement, according to a study conducted in August 2008 and published in September 2009 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. But there are hints that social media may alter this pattern. Here is an excerpt from the Summary of Findings.

- Whether they take place on the internet or off, traditional political activities remain the domain of those with high levels of income and education.
- There are hints that forms of civic engagement anchored in blogs and social networking sites could alter long-standing patterns that are based on socioeconomic status.
- Those who use blogs and social networking sites as an outlet for civic engagement are far more active in traditional realms of political and nonpolitical participation than are other internet users. In addition, they are even more active than those who do not use the internet at all.
- The internet is now part of the fabric of everyday civic life. Half of those who are involved in a political or community group communicate with other group members using digital tools such as email or group websites.
- Respondents report that public officials are no less responsive to email than to snail mail. Online communications to government officials are just as likely to draw a response as contacts in person, over the phone, or by letter.
- Those who make political donations are more likely to use the internet to make their contributions than are those who make charitable donations; however, large political donations are much less likely to be made online than are large charitable donations.

Authors of the Internet and Civic Engagement report are: Aaron Smith, Research Specialist; Kay Lehman Schlozman, Boston College; Sidney Verba, Harvard University; and Henry Brady, University of California-Berkeley. For the entire report, go to: http:||www.pewinternet.org|Reports|2009|15--The-Internet-and-Civic-Engagement.aspx



Public Engagement on Fairfax County's Budget

By David Molchany, Deputy County Executive
Greg Licamele, Office of Public Affairs
Jeremy Lasich, Office of Public Affairs
Mark Matthews, Office of Management and Budget
Anita Rao, Department of Information Technology

Fairfax County is just outside Washington D.C. It has a population of more than 1 million residents, a combined county/schools budget of nearly $6 billion and nearly 35,000 county/schools employees. It is a key economic engine for the commonwealth and the National Capital Region. Fairfax County offers citizens many tools for interaction and participation with county government in order to improve citizen-to-government networking. With the use of modern information technologies to improve citizen access to government information and services, social media platforms are employed to expand and redefine communication efforts beyond traditional news releases. The county fosters communications and boosts transparency using Web 2.0 platform tools with its "Get Fairfax" branding on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

When it focused on the challenge of eliminating a projected revenue shortfall of $650 million for the 2010 fiscal year, which began July 1, 2009, the county turned to its citizens for help. The public was encouraged to participate through face-to-face meetings, an extensive media campaign, an outreach program with extensive use of social media and a one-stop shop on the county's revamped website. The goal was to create a budget that included the appropriate level of services that, in light of the projected shortfall, were both sustainable and acceptable to the community.

The county held 20 face-to-face community dialogue sessions, with 718 members of the public attending; and five employee brownbag lunch sessions, with 197 employees attending. Concurrently, the county used online and telephone (integrated voice response) technology for public questions, comments and suggestions. More than 1,497 distinct comments were recorded electronically.

An extensive media campaign for the effort included news releases, newspaper advertisements, 1,900 fliers to school and community groups, 200 posters in county and school facilities, video segments broadcasted on the county's television station, and information and videos posted on the county's Facebook and YouTube sites.

All of the documents presented at the community dialogue sessions were published online here so people who could not attend a meeting had access to the information. This was a critical step not only for outreach but also education because the budget is a complex topic.

A separate Web page also was created for employees on the county's intranet with specific workforce information. The county executive hosted a live online chat where employees sent in questions; he and key staff answered more than 75 questions online.

As the community outreach process came to a close, the county shifted its strategy to inform the public about budget proposals and final adoption through social media and its website www.fairfaxcounty.gov. Now, Fairfax County uses Twitter to provide live coverage of the Board of Supervisors meetings. When the county executive proposed his budget to the elected officials, every major idea he presented was tweeted, so the county's followers could see the potential changes and then provide feedback online through e-mail or to their elected officials. Fairfax County also used its Facebook page throughout the process to point people back to the government budget page RSS feeds were also used to keep the public informed when new information was published; including the hundreds of questions elected officials asked county staff to reply to regarding the budget. All of these questions and answers were published online to provide transparency.

The result of this multichannel public engagement effort was a great deal of public input to help the county executive and staff create a proposed FY 2010 budget and ultimately to guide the decisions of the county's Board of Supervisors in approving its final budget plan.

Addition of enhanced interactive features to the website will remain a strategic focus. These include videos on demand and streaming videos through the county's government-access television station, library audio books, special-needs registry supporting emergency response situations, and citizens' participation in countywide initiatives. The numerous online services offer the citizens the opportunity to conduct business and transactions with the government 24/7, without walls, doors or clocks, creating a virtual government.

Fairfax County harnesses new information, communication and social technologies in order to empower public services, affirming the county's strategic goals and belief that return on investment is really "return on engagement."

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Citizen Engagement in Oakland County

By Phil Bertolini
Deputy County Executive/CIO
Oakland County, Michigan

E-government is a critical component of citizen engagement efforts at all levels of government. But what does e-government-enabled citizen engagement look like at the local level? Oakland County, Michigan, has explored a range of opportunities for harnessing e-government to engage citizens in local government.

In today's world, technological advances are carrying us farther into the information age at an unprecedented pace. With each leap forward, the Web becomes progressively more integrated in the daily life of most Americans. Considering the often uneasy balance between citizens' increasing demands for convenient, accessible government service and governments' shrinking budgets, how can local governments continue to engage citizens in meaningful ways?

E-government can facilitate citizen engagement in a way that benefits everyone, enabling a digital community that is well advanced in the adoption and integration of technology into daily life at home, work and play. E-government is a purposeful response to a new information economy, with emphasis on citizen-focused service delivery.

The development of e-government programs has generally occurred in four stages. The first two stages, presence and interaction, consist mainly of one-way Web-based communication from government to citizens. Under this model, citizens are consumers of government information, and are still reliant on government employees to complete a given task. In the third stage, transaction, citizens are empowered to complete entire tasks online, using Web-based self-service applications. The fourth stage, transformation, redefines the delivery of government information and services while reshaping the relationship between citizens, businesses, employees and government.

Ideally, the transaction and transformation phases move beyond simple automation of routine tasks, emphasizing development of robust services for citizens, instead of throwing services at citizens and hoping for the best. To engage citizens in this process, governments must shift their view of citizens as consumers, and allow citizens to become contributors in the development of government policies and programs. This type of citizen engagement creates avenues for two-way dialog.

This dialog is critical for the ongoing success of local government operations. Unlike most other services, citizens cannot shop around for an alternative government. In some cases, such as payment of taxes, citizens are compelled to accept the government services. These compulsory transactions with government can and should be balanced through a more collaborative relationship between citizens and government. When citizens are engaged and have a role in the development of relevant, efficient and convenient government services, everyone wins.

One of Oakland County's earliest citizen engagement successes was the Business Roundtable. Created 1993, this advisory group includes representatives of business, government and education in Oakland County. The roundtable is charged with creating programs that enhance Oakland County's business climate and quality of life. Over the years, the group has crafted a range of strategies for better funding for road improvements, simplified business development processes, and improved access to job training programs. More than 80 percent of the several hundred roundtable recommendations have been implemented. Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm replicated elements of Oakland County's Business Roundtable on a statewide basis when forming the Governor's Council of Economic Advisors.

One of the most unique examples of citizen engagement through cross-boundary services is the county's one-of-a-kind service model for e-mail subscription and alert services. When Oakland County launched GovDelivery's E-mail and Digital Subscription Management solution on its own website, the county also negotiated a contract to expand the service to each of its 62 local governments, who may now use the system free. This enables smaller municipalities to maximize citizen engagement through communication technologies that they might not have been able to fund otherwise. The email subscription function provides an opportunity for citizens to receive updated information for topics they are interested in. The Oakland County web site contains over 25,000 pages of content which can be overwhelming to the average user of county services. A citizen can choose their preferred topics by simply subscribing for a specific set of information, for example, H1N1 Flu Information. Every time the web content is updated by county staff an email is generated and sent to the subscriber with a specific link to the new content. Receiving only the data they need will be a more efficient communication relationship between government and citizen.

Oakland County also makes good use of focus groups, surveys and polls to engage citizens in the development of new programs and services at the local level. Suggestions and requests are collected directly from citizens or via employees of county departments, who often act as e-government eyes and ears in observing opportunities for citizen-focused service improvements. Some of the

county's most heavily used Web-based e-commerce services were initially developed in this way.

Citizen engagement is further enabled through the use of Web 2.0 technologies. Web 2.0 includes a broad range of technologies. Adding a social dimension or opt-in communication feature to a local government website engages citizens where they are and on their own terms, instead of forcing citizens to conform to government's terms. Oakland County has used Web 2.0 technologies to engage citizens through its podcasts, multimedia video series, e-mail and alerts subscriptions, blogs and forums.

By making its media communications available on iTunes and participating in popular social websites – including Flickr, YouTube and Facebook – the county is reaching a wider base of citizens than ever before.

More information about all of the examples discussed here is available at www.oakgov.com.

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Washington Goes to Mr. Smith: The Changing Role of Citizens in Policy Development

By Matt Leighninger
Executive Director
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In the movie "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," our innocent leading man, played by Jimmy Stewart, becomes a senator almost by accident. He has only one legislative priority: setting up a summer camp for boys in his home state. In order to accomplish his goal, and ensure that the voices of his constituents are heard, he is forced to shout above the din of big media and corrupt politicians. During a dramatic filibuster, the strength of his conviction shines through, and he wins the day.

For a variety of reasons, a growing number of federal managers are reversing the roles in Frank Capra's script. In order to keep public decisions from turning into political debacles – and in order to make their own voices heard over the din of activists and the media – federal managers are bringing those decisions directly to the public. They want the public to take on an intermediary role in policy development, somewhere between utter ignorance and absolute control. They want ordinary people to become more informed about the issues, settle some of their disagreements, and appreciate the tough choices that officials are forced to make. In agencies as diverse as the Centers for Disease Control, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Highway Administration, and the National Nanotechnology Coordination Office, Washington is going to Mr. Smith.

This trend has been evident for some time, but the 2008 presidential election and the advent of the Obama administration have given it added momentum. The election showed that the new attitudes and capacities of ordinary citizens could be harnessed as part of a national electoral strategy; the challenge of the new administration is to transfer that energy into the day-to-day work of democratic governance.

A scene from the movie, 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," starring Jimmy Stewart as the title character.

When they turn toward Mr. (and Ms.) Smith, managers generally have several goals in mind:

- Gathering policy input from a broad cross-section of citizens;
- Defusing tension and conflict around particular public decisions;
- Rebuilding public trust and helping citizens understand how difficult the role of government can be;
- Gaining a better understanding of the language and ideas they would need to use in order to reach even larger numbers of people; and

- Encouraging citizens (and the nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, businesses, and faith-based groups they belong to) to take actions that support and complement public policies.

All of these goals respond to, and capitalize on, the new capacities and concerns of 21st century citizens. The change in citizenship is most evident at the local level, where ordinary people are playing increasingly active roles – sometimes productive, sometimes disruptive – in public decision-making and problem-solving. Citizens may have less time for public life, but they bring more knowledge and skills to the table. They feel more entitled to the services and protection of government, and yet have less faith that government will be able to deliver on those promises. They are less connected to community affairs, and yet they seem better able to find the information, allies, and resources they need to affect an issue or decision they care about. The bottom line is that citizens are better at governing, and worse at being governed, than ever before.

Attempts to incorporate citizens into policymaking have been far more common at the neighborhood, local, and county levels than at the state and federal levels. The federal agencies with the most experience in citizen involvement tend to be the ones that make local decisions – how to manage a toxic waste cleanup, for example, or whether to protect an old-growth forest – and their interactions with citizens usually focus on those local policies rather than national ones. However, citizen participation projects dealing with state and federal policies are on the rise, partly because some officials at those levels of government are now feeling the same kinds of pressures as their local counterparts.

To address these challenges and opportunities, public officials, public employees, and other kinds of leaders are trying various ways – some successful, some not – of working more productively with citizens. Several successful principles have emerged from this work:

1. Recruiting people by reaching out through the various groups and organizations to which they belong, in order to assemble a large and diverse critical mass of citizens. The best involvement projects map their communities, figure out what people belong to, and convince leaders within those groups and organizations to recruit people they already know.
2. Involving those citizens in a combination of small- and large-group meetings: structured, facilitated small groups for informed, deliberative dialogue and large forums for amplifying shared conclusions and moving from talk to action. One of the worst practices in traditional citizen involvement has been to use large meetings for things (such as dialogue) that can only be effective in small meetings and vice versa.
3. Giving the participants in these meetings the opportunity to compare values and experiences, and to consider a range of views and policy options. People have to be able to connect these issues to their own lives and what matters to them.
4. Encouraging and effecting change in a number of ways: by applying citizen input to policy and planning decisions; encouraging change within organizations and institutions; creating teams to work on particular action ideas; and/or inspiring and connecting individual volunteers. The result of this more comprehensive approach is essentially policy with a small 'p,' meaning not just laws and ordinances but all the things that all of us can do to solve public problems.

Building on these principles will be critical if we want to enhance democracy at the federal level. The Internet has so far been underutilized in this work; online technologies offer terrific potential for tracking and measuring public

Citizens may have less time for public life, but they bring more knowledge and skills to the table.

engagement, providing new incentives for people to participate, helping participants find the information they need, and providing new venues for dialogue and deliberation. At the same time, the four successful principles are often most evident in local, face-to-face settings. As Will Friedman has pointed out (see Friedman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Scope," Journal of Public Deliberation, 2006), our attempts to involve citizens in federal issues should capitalize on, and help to strengthen, local democratic structures and opportunities.

These attempts to reach out to citizens are, on one level, a reversal of "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." But they are motivated by many of the same impulses apparent in Jimmy Stewart's character: the need to understand and explain citizen values in Washington, and the desire to rebuild trust and communication back home. The new dynamic in 21st century politics has given us a new urgency, and new opportunities, to recast the relationship between citizens and government.

Matt Leighninger is the executive director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. Portions of this essay were adapted from his book, The Next Form of Democracy *(Vanderbilt University Press).*

Ohio Redistricting Competition

By the Office of Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner

In March 2009, a partnership of organizations and individuals, announced an Ohio Redistricting Competition, which challenged the public to design a Congressional redistricting plan for the state that would be fairer and more balanced than the plan currently in place.

Creators of the Competition formed a public-private partnership among citizen leaders, including the League of Women Voters of Ohio, current Ohio State Representative Dan Stewart and former Ohio State Representative Joan Lawrence, professors at The Ohio State University, Ohio Citizen Action, and Common Cause Ohio, some of whom have worked on redistricting issues for decades. Approached by the partners, Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner agreed to host the process and to make resources and training available to the public. When the Competition kicked off after more than nine months of planning, the public had the historic opportunity to demonstrate that an open process based on objective criteria can produce fair legislative districts in Ohio. Redistricting is inherently political, but the Competition demonstrated how undue political influence in the redistricting process could be minimized.

Competition Objectives

A good redistricting process should rely on two big ideas: preserving Ohio communities and promoting competitive elections. These ideas work together to create fair districts and minimize the ability to "game" the system for any political party.

Keeping those ideas in mind, contest objectives were developed as a guide for participants. To endeavor to preserve Ohio communities, participants were scored on their ability to preserve communities of interest by minimizing the fragmentation of counties and municipalities for purely political reasons, and to achieve compactness, by avoiding bizarre, politically-motivated, "gerrymandered" districts.

Participants were encouraged to aim for competitiveness, by creating districts that could reasonably be won by either major political party, and fairness, by achieving a balance of elected representatives that mirrors the political preferences of Ohioans.

Competition Procedure

To promote dialogue on redistricting reform, the Competition partners provided broad access to the technical, demographic, and political data required to redraw district boundaries. Through partnerships with the Northern Ohio Data and Information Service at Cleveland State University and with The Ohio State University, the partners offered free access to highly specialized redistricting software using geographic information systems technology that each competitor could access via the Internet on a home computer. The Ohio Channel permitted on-demand web access to a training video on the software. Many interested individuals from across Ohio and the nation who requested information on the Competition were also granted access to the software program.

The current boundaries of Ohio Congressional Districts

Competition Results

Results were announced on June 18, 2009. Of 14 plans submitted by members of the public, three plans were judged to be the best based on the scoring criteria used in the Competition. There was no one winner declared the "best plan," nor were there prizes for the three winners. Three plans were disqualified because they did not meet the threshold requirements of having substantially equal population, being composed of contiguous, non-

overlapping areas, and complying with voting rights protections under federal law. The other eight plans did not score as well when they were compared in the matrix.

According to the Ohio Redistricting Competition partners, the Competition provides concrete proof that an open process based on objective criteria can produce fair legislative districts in Ohio. The use of a balanced, robust scoring model made it difficult for an individual to "game" the system to benefit any one political party.

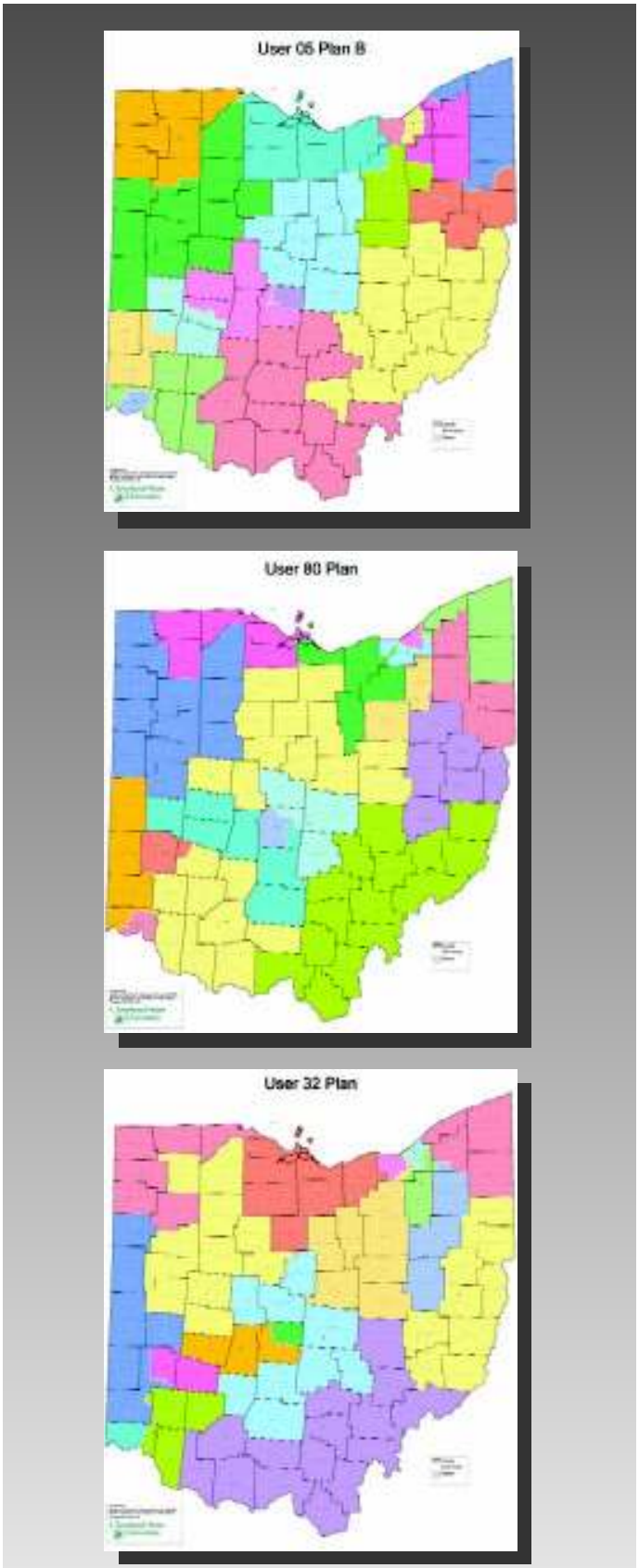
The results showed that even the lowest-scoring entry in the Competition was quantitatively fairer than the actual 2000 redistricting plan. The Competition yielded districts that were evenly split, competitive for either party, with a high level of community preservation and appropriate compactness. The results were in stark contrast to the way districts are currently split along partisan lines, with very few that are competitive, a low level of community preservation and a low level of compactness.

The winning plans improved upon the current process where there are no rules or criteria other than federal case law and principles delineated in the Constitution regarding compactness and equipopulation. It guaranteed a process that was not open for "political games." Because the Competition was open to everyone, unlike the traditional partisan process where Congressional districts are drawn by the General Assembly through legislation and Legislative districts are drawn by the Apportionment Board, citizens felt engaged in this process that encourages a vibrant democracy.

The Ohio Redistricting Competition succeeded where the current process failed because it was open to the public, relied on objective rules that everyone could follow and focused on the public interest, not partisan gamesmanship. Anyone could submit a plan because the software and training were free for participants and every step of the process was transparent.

As the dialogue on redistricting reform in Ohio continues, the results of the Competition demonstrate that a fair, open, objective process relying on citizen involvement can provide valuable information for policymakers. The partner organizations have since pulled together a draft constitutional amendment based on the lessons learned from the Competition. They hope to work with the General Assembly to place the issue on the ballot in 2010.

Contributors to this article include: Patrick Gallaway, Bryan Clark, Josh Kimsey and Luisa Barone.



The three winning plans judged to be more fair and balanced than the current Congressional Districts.

Planning for Citizen Engagement

By Kathryn J. Brasier
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Pennsylvania State University

Local governments, community organizations, and public agencies make better decisions and have a greater impact when they increase the frequency, diversity, and level of citizen engagement. Citizens are engaged when they play an effective role in decision-making. They are actively involved in defining the issues, identifying solutions, and developing priorities. Here, we summarize strategies that:

- Increase citizens' knowledge
- Encourage citizens to apply that knowledge
- Create opportunities for citizens to engage each other and
- Ensure opportunities are ongoing.

Why Engage Citizens?

It's the right thing to do: Citizen engagement supports principles of a democratic system, including equal opportunity to influence public decision-making and popular sovereignty. It supports the ethic that all those affected by a decision should have a say in that decision.

It works: Citizen engagement creates more effective solutions. Participatory processes enhance legitimacy of solutions and decrease conflict.

It creates other benefits: Engagement improves citizens' knowledge, communication, and problem-solving skills. Participants who have traditionally been marginalized can become empowered. Trust in community organizations and governmental agencies can increase.

What are Basic Principles of Citizen Engagement?

Effective engagement results from a high-quality process. Principles of successful citizen-engagement activities include:

- ***Diversity:*** Seek participants who represent multiple viewpoints, ideas, resources, and social networks;
- ***Inclusivity:*** Reduce barriers to participation, including knowledge, experiences, and cultural differences;
- ***Equality:*** Ensure equal participation and influence in the process;
- ***Transparency:*** Communicate the work of the group clearly, both internally and externally;
- ***Legitimacy:*** Justify all decisions, and show how participants' input affected the decisions;
- ***Deliberation:*** Provide opportunities to share ideas and values, discuss them, and come to agreement as a group;

- ***Substance:*** Create opportunities to learn and apply that knowledge;
- ***Influence:*** Ensure the outcome influences decision-making;
- ***Ongoing:*** Create opportunities at all stages of the decision-making process, and allow time for reflection;
- ***Accommodation:*** Provide opportunities to participate at multiple times and locations.

Developing a Citizen Engagement Plan

A citizen engagement plan will identify why citizen engagement is necessary, what you hope to achieve, and the processes you will use. First, identify the goal: What do you want to learn or change? Are you prepared to act on the results? Do you have the necessary time and resources? To start, assemble a planning team to represent all stakeholders. The team will identify goals, select appropriate techniques, recruit participants, and publicize the project.

Step 1: Define the Issue: Frame the problem as an issue for discussion. This shapes perceptions of the issue and the range of solutions. The frame should set a neutral tone and identify a feasible scope of action. For example, frame the problem of "latch-key kids" as "opportunities for youth."

Step 2: Identify the Purpose of Engagement: Why do people need to be involved, and to what extent? There is a continuum of possibilities:

Inform > **Consult** > **Engage** > **Collaborate**

- To inform means to provide citizens and decision-makers with information.
- To consult is to get feedback or stimulate public debate.
- To engage means incorporating citizens' views in the decision-making process.
- To collaborate involves creating long-term partnerships of citizens and officials to address the issue.

Step 3: Identify Tools for Engagement: The purpose of engagement will guide the choice of tools.

- *Tools to inform* include interviews, surveys, and public hearings. These tools describe demographic characteristics; assess priorities; describe opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors; assess policy support; evaluate existing programs and identify gaps in services; and provide a platform to express opinions.
- *Tools to consult* include nominal group processes (i.e., listening sessions), Delphi techniques, and focus groups. These techniques generate prioritized lists of issues, problems, or opportunities, and can initiate discussion of issues.
- *Tools to engage* include public issues forums, citizens' panels, and design workshops, and result in recommendations for policymakers. These processes provide citizens with multiple perspectives and time for interaction and reflection.
- *Tools to collaborate* include study circles and community task forces, and produce prioritized goals and action steps. Collaboration involves enhanced, repeated interaction among participants.

Step 4: Identify Potential Participants: All those who can affect or who may be affected by a decision should be invited. Effective recruiting brings diverse ideas, skills, and experiences that enhance discussions. Recruit from both established groups (leaders, officials, organizations) and from groups often overlooked (minorities, women, youth, newcomers, low-income individuals, etc.). Invite those who have disagreed in the past, as they have demonstrated concern. Identify barriers to participation (i.e., language, knowledge, location, cultural differences) and remove them.

Step 5: Develop a Recruitment and Retention Plan: A formal plan targets participants and identifies contact methods. The recruitment plan should also identify retention strategies that support participants' growth and reward their efforts.

Step 6: Create a Positive Environment: Create an environment in which participants' time is used effectively. Ensure that meetings are productive and comfortable for participants, and communicate clearly about objectives and action steps. Most importantly, follow up with action.

Step 7: Identify Evaluation Criteria: Establish benchmarks, and continually evaluate progress toward the group's goals. Be sure to celebrate successes.

Step 8: Maintain Lines of Communication: Provide ongoing opportunities to participate and be informed. This could entail periodic publications (e.g., newsletters), a website, as well as special activities (celebrations, family events, etc.). Develop a plan for working with local media.

Conclusion

A more engaged citizenry leads to better decisions, more efficient resource allocation, and reduced conflict. However, getting all the pieces in place can be daunting and take considerable resources. The suggestions included here provide a starting point for enhancing your citizen engagement efforts.

Funding support for this research was provided by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. A copy of the full report is available at the Center's website (http:||www.ruralpa.org). University Park, PA 16802. For additional information contact kbrasier@psu.edu.

Potholes and PDAs

By Mike McGrath
Editor
National Civic League

Since they started "Reinventing Government" in the early 1990s, public managers have looked for new ways to deliver high quality services to citizens in a cost-effective, efficient manner and courteous manner. Squeezed between declining revenues and increasing costs, local governments learned to become, in the words of authors David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, more "mission driven," "customer driven" and "market oriented."

Advocates of civic engagement, however, often object to the language of markets and customer relations with its implication that citizens are passive consumers of goods and services. Yet the two values of public-administration, better customer relations and active citizen engagement -- are by no means contradictory. As the old saying goes, knowledge is power, and some of the same information systems developed to increase efficiency and enhance "customer satisfaction" can be used to foster citizen engagement and public learning.

ComNET (Computerized Neighborhood Environment Tracking) was developed by the Fund for the City of New York's Center on Government Performance as part of its effort to find new ways of engaging citizens in performance assessment and reporting. During a series of focus group meetings, it was discovered that citizens and government employees didn't always measure the performance of government agencies in the same way. One revelation was that citizens care a lot more about the appearance of their streets and sidewalks than many public works officials realized. It is one of the most visible indicators of how their neighborhoods are faring, and ComNET helps them underscore that point.

Worcester, Massachusetts, began using ComNET and changed the way public managers and citizens view their respective roles and responsibilities. The program arms neighborhood groups with handheld computers and digital cameras, allowing them to document street level problems and report them to the appropriate agency. Traveling in groups of three or four, citizens roam the streets on weekends looking for potholes, buckling sidewalks, derelict vehicles, weed-strewn lots, illegal garbage dumps and downed stop signs. The information is uploaded via the Internet to the Worcester Regional Research Bureau's ComNET Connection. The bureau then generates spreadsheets, analyzes the information and shares the findings with neighborhood associations, which get a better picture of what they should be asking the city to fix. Since 2003, thousands of abandoned vehicles have been removed from the streets by Worcester's Department of Public Works, thanks in part to New York City's ComNET.

In Somerville, Massachusetts, a Boston-area city of about 80,000, local officials hope to combine the benefits of a data-driven performance management system with regularly scheduled, ward-based public meetings. Somerville began its ResiStat meetings in 2007 to complete the feedback loop between citizens and government. The comments and suggestions of residents are reported back to the city's semi-weekly data-driven performance evaluation meetings and compiled in an annual Resident Report that is published along with the official city budget. Thomas Champion, executive director of the city's office of communications, says email groups have emerged from these ResiStat meetings and these groups are constantly sharing information. "There is a lot of communication between ResiStat members directly to SomerStat throughout the year," he says. "We are creating a civically engaged group in each ward that is constantly talking to itself and to the city and using a common reference

point. They know what is going on. They have an inside look at how the city is allocating resources in their areas."

"This brings us to a position of mutual understanding and knowledge," says Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone when asked about his "ResiStat" program. "We're building a level of true collaboration between citizens and government, and that's great for the future of the city." The origins of ResiStat go back to 1994 and efforts by the New York City Police Department to link crime fighting efforts to timely, accurate data generated by police calls, computers and databases under the city's CompStat program. Geographic information system software was used to pinpoint problem areas in the city and regular performance management meetings were held to ensure that resources were being deployed in the most efficient manner. The resulting drop in crime rates was dramatic, and other cities noticed.

As part of Somerville's "ResiStat" program, the mayor, the local alderman and other city officials meet with citizens in each of the city's nine wards, which correspond roughly to neighborhoods, and five special interest groups (parents, young people and speakers of the city's three main foreign languages—Spanish, Portuguese and Creole.) The goal of these public meetings is to present information generated through SomerStat, the city's data-driven performance management system, and get feedback from citizens. To build SomerStat the Mayor borrowed the CitiStat model from Baltimore, which itself had been adapted from New York City's CompStat.

One outcome from SomerStat was development of a 311 Call Center, a 24-hour service allowing citizens to ask questions and make requests for service from the city. Easy to answer questions are handled immediately. Others are answered in a timely manner through e-mail or a follow-up call, ensuring that citizens are not shunted from one department to another. Requests for service are entered into a database, given a tracking number so citizens can find out how things are proceeding. The 311 calls and work orders became an important source of data for SomerStat.

It is too early to judge the success of ResiStat. Somerville officials readily acknowledge that it is a work in progress, but it offers an interesting model that other cities seeking to link data management, performance assessment and civic engagement may want to consider. Also, it has already raised expectations among Somerville residents. When a change in parking regulation was announced recently, some complained that there wasn't adequate public input. "The perception is that the old modes of civic engagement aren't good enough anymore," says Champion. "Citizens do feel that on a whole range of issues and services, they are better informed and more engaged than they have ever been."

Mike McGrath is editor of the National Civic Review, *a 98-year-old journal of civic affairs published by the National Civic League (www.ncl.org) and Jossey-Bass. His recent report on the "The New Laboratories of Democracy: How Local Government is Reinventing Civic Engagement" is online at: http:||www.pacefunders.org|*

New Media Makers Pioneer Novel Forms of News

By Jan Schaffer
Executive Director
J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism

The first U.S. forays into citizen media began in earnest only in 2004. By mid-2009, it was clear that so-called "citizen journalism" was not a monolithic phenomenon, but rather it was evolving in some interesting and exciting ways. Indeed, from bedroom communities outside New York City to the exurbs of Boston to postindustrial behemoths like Philadelphia, new media makers have begun launching all kinds of news and information projects.

Some are random acts of journalism, such as eyewitnesses uploading photos or videos of a major catastrophe or event. Some are the rants of Internet cowboys opining on the state of neighborhood affairs in their individual blogs. But a more important phenomenon is under way. Increasingly, efforts are launching to try to fill information gaps in communities. They tend to be websites, constructed with an architecture and a mind-set to report about discrete topics or cover geographic areas.

Many of these new media makers don't aspire to be bloggers. They seek to provide accurate accounts of day-to-day happenings in communities that nowadays have little or no daily news coverage. "We're trying to produce what *used* to be a newspaper," said Christine Yeres, who launched NewCastleNOW.org two years ago in Chappaqua, N.Y., which got little coverage from other news outlets in Westchester County. "I think we get the readership that we do because ... it is professional. It's been gone over very carefully."

Here are some examples of different citizen-media efforts. They all add value in different ways:

- Micro-local news sites founded by people trying to fill

news voids in their communities, such as the award-winning JDLand.com, which covers the Washington, D.C., area around the new Nationals baseball stadium.

- Local or citywide sites founded by former journalists. These include MinnPost.com in the Twin Cities, the St. Louis Beacon and NewHavenIndependent.org in Connecticut.
- Sites launched by conventional media to attract user-generated content. Take a look at CNN's iReport.com, the Chicago Tribune's TribLocal.com or the New York Times' The Local.
- National and international sites, such as NowPublic.com, which solicit and publish public photos, video and articles from around the world.
- Smart blogger sites, such as HuffingtonPost.com or Talking Points Memo.
- Sites that aggregate, curate (and sometimes translate) Third World bloggers, often filling gaps created by nonexistent media or government-controlled media. See GlobalVoicesOnline.org and its Rising Voices micro-funding arm.
- Sites such as Ushahidi.com that use mobile phones and text messages to report on crisis hot spots.

Increasingly, as legacy news organizations fret about future business models or fail entirely, these startups are attracting support from philanthropic organizations whose mission statements never mention the word "media."

A new study released in June 2009 by my center, J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism, found that 180 foundations had awarded at least $128 million in grants to support 115 news initiatives since 2005.

Attesting to the new media-makers trend, nearly 87 percent – or 102 of the 115 news initiatives – launched in only the past three and a half years. They range from hyperlocal to health to watchdog sites.

Remarkably, almost $65 million of these philanthropic dollars went to support investigative journalism. Of the 11 Investigative projects tracked in the study, six had launched since 2005. They range from the well-funded Pro Publica ($30.8 million) to American University's Investigative Reporting Workshop ($720,000), to the newly launched Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism ($100,000).

Many funders see their support as no less than a bulwark to defend democracy. "The core of all this is that democracy needs a free flow of information," said Alberto Ibargüen, president and CEO of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Knight has blazed a trail in funding news startups with initiatives such as the Knight News Challenge and the Knight Community Information Challenge and with support for J-Lab's New Voices community news startups.

Ibargüen is jump-starting a role for other foundations to fund media by promising to match their support for community news and information projects to the tune of $24 million during the next five years. The first call for projects attracted 170 proposals for $5 million in Knight funding. Twenty-one winners were announced in February 2009.

Elsewhere – in Chicago, Philadelphia and San Francisco – other foundations are responding to diminishing news coverage and vanishing newspapers by analyzing their local media landscape and asking what role they should be playing.

For the most part, these foundations are not so much seeking to shore up commercial news enterprises as they are looking to shore up community knowledge-sharing. They are looking to *build* community, not simply to cover it.

And they can be forthright in acknowledging this. San Diego philanthropist Buzz Woolley founded the enterprising Voice of San Diego in 2004 out of frustration that news critical to the city's health was not being brought to public's attention.

"We did not start this as an act of journalism or an act of business," Woolley said of his news site, which is now a $1-million-a-year operation. "We did this as a civic effort to provide information to the community about things that are important."

It is on this new terrain that old journalism values – accuracy, independence and objectivity – are combining with new journalism conventions. Where Big-J journalists excel at covering communities from the outside-in, many of these new media makers are creating the models for how to cover communities from the *inside-out*.

"Sometimes, we want to be the *New York Times*, and sometimes we want to be the church bulletin," says Susie Pender, co-editor at NewCastleNOW.org.

The *New York Times* has been a beacon for aspiring media moguls for well over a century. But the new millennium has brought an economic crisis in the newspaper industry and technology that allows up-to-the-minute, on-the-spot personalized news. It suggests a model that may be closer to an electronic church bulletin in the future than the "Gray Lady" that ruled the golden age of newspapers.

J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism is a center of American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C. Its study, "New Media Makers. A Toolkit for Innovators in Community Media and Grant Making" is online at the Knight Citizen News Network, http:||www.kcnn.org|toolkit

Putting Your Audience to Work: EPA's Radon Video Contest

By Jeremy Ames
Office of Radiation and Indoor Air
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

How do keep your organization's message fresh and audience engaged? This question takes on new level of urgency when your mission is to educate the public about radon, a radioactive gas responsible for more than 20,000 lung cancer deaths annually. To reach a whole new generation of homebuyers we designed a video contest to recruit creative citizens to us help spread this critical public health message.

The Challenge

Radon, the second leading cause of lung cancer, after smoking, has long been a public communications challenge. The naturally occurring radioactive gas is invisible and odorless, and with no bad guy, public outrage has given way to apathy. Fortunately testing is easy and inexpensive, and homes with high levels can be fixed. For almost 20 years, EPA's radon program has produced public service announcements, which have garnered donated television and radio time, resulting in millions of Americans testing their homes. But today's first-time homebuyers have many more media options than their parents did. Overloaded with marketing messages, consumers are more likely than ever to tune out or fast-forward past even the best-crafted public health messages.

Online video sharing is a promising new tool the public communication toolbox. Video-sharing sites such as YouTube have grown exponentially during the past few years and are popular among younger demographic groups. Compared to television, online videos are often cheaper to produce and easier to target to specific demographics. This made online video-sharing a promising medium for radon messaging, but rather than develop our own content, we opted instead to sponsor a video contest to:

- Tap the creativity of our target audience;
- Populate the Web with multiple videos on the program's key message; and
- Track online views to provide insight into which creative approaches were the most effective.

The Idea

In 2008, EPA sponsored an Earth Day photo contest using Flickr asking for photos to illustrate the agency's mission to protect the environmental and public health; 162 photos

were submitted demonstrating the potential for audience engagement using Web 2.0 tools. Although the private sector had used video contests successfully, no federal agency had yet tried the approach. We consulted early on with multiple offices within EPA to explore how to implement such a contest. Key considerations explored were:

- **Government Contests.** Given the challenge of the subject, we needed an incentive to pique interest. Could a federal agency sponsor a contest with a cash prize? EPA's Office of General Counsel had to go all the way back to a 1927 precedent in the GAO Redbook (4-162), a design contest for the Arlington Memorial Bridge, which allows agencies to procure artists' designs through a competition. The award, OGC told us, must be related to the cost of the expense of producing the entry, so we prepared a cost estimate and settled on a $2,500 award.
- **Competition Process.** We required a fair and open competition process. We posted contest eligibility guidelines, rules, and judging criteria on the program's Website and selected a technical evaluation panel of EPA employees to judge the entries against the criteria. We also had to obtain special permission to issue the winner payment by check.
- **Copyright.** The winner(s) would have to waive their rights to the video.
- **Video Submittal**. We set up a free YouTube group to accept entries and also gave contestants the option of mailing them directly to us. We included a nonendorsement disclaimer for YouTube on the registration page.

The Contest

We launched the contest in July 2008, with entrants given six weeks to submit their videos. Soon after launching the registration site – along with the rules and guidelines, and accompanying YouTube group to display the entries – we began marketing the contest. The first week of marketing is perhaps the most critical to success. We marketed primarily on the Web, and the only cost was our time. The most effective targets included:

- Websites and blogs for aspiring filmmakers, and sites specifically to showcase video contests, e.g. Vidopp.com, Filmthenext.com;
- Social and environmental cause forums, e.g. treehugger.com, socialedge.org;
- Social and professional networking sites such as Facebook and GovLoop; and
- Media tagging sites such as Digg and del.icio.us.

Waiting is perhaps the most difficult part of the process, but patience pays off. The first entry came after two weeks, and more than half the entries came in the last week. In total, we received 30 entries, beating our best expectations. The judges panel evaluated the videos on creativity, originality, quality, technical accuracy, and content.

The Results

In September, we announced the winning video at the National Radon Meeting in Las Vegas. "Eddie's Story" takes the form of a personal (and true) testimonial from lung cancer survivor Eddie Metcalfe, who explains his surprising lung cancer diagnosis despite being a non-smoker, and subsequent effort to test and fix his home, the video makers using close-ups and graphics to illustrate Eddie's words.

The video is on www.epa.gov for viewing and sharing, and in fall 2009 will be distributed to television stations. Closed-captioning made the video 508 compliant, a requirement for all federal government websites. Three additional videos won honorable mentions.

All the entries can still be viewed at on the YouTube contest page. As of August, 2009 they had received more than 24,000 views collectively, continued to average 1,000 additional views each month. Media also provided positive coverage of the contest.

EPA's Office of Water adapted this approach and launched its own Water Quality Video Contest in March. That contest asked for 30- to 60-second Public Service Announcements and one- to three-minute educational videos, with a $2,500 prize for each category. The office received more than 250 entries, with the winners announced in June. The Department of Health and Human Services launched a Flu Prevention PSA contest in July with similar rules and prize and received over 230 entries. Several other federal agencies are planning their own contests, and EPA is among a number of agencies to launch its own YouTube channel.

Social media tools offer many opportunities for citizen engagement, and federal agencies are beginning to take the plunge.

Jeremy Ames joined EPA's Office of Radiation and Indoor Air in 2004. For additional information, contact ames.jeremy@epa.gov.

A Millennial Model of Civic Engagement

By Nick Troiano and Chris Golden
Co-Founders
myImpact.org

The tools of engagement have changed. A new generation is rising. Modern technology and ideas of citizen participation are redefining civic engagement in the 21st century: Barriers to entry are lower, and the fundamental relationship between citizens and the entities they are connected with is different. Organizations – nonprofits, government agencies, and others – that will successfully adapt to this new model will understand their young audience and the new ways to engage them.

The millennial generation, those born roughly between 1976 and 1996, is composed of about 80 million people. Time-strapped and debt-laden, millennials have one main thing to give: energy. They are defined by a sense of civic responsibility post-9/11 and are motivated by the large and growing social challenges facing our nation. They are looking to make a difference. But there are some strings attached.

Before reaching out to young people, the first question an organization should ask itself is whether its mission and means of achieving it aligns with the values of its audience. Volunteer service, for example, is a core value of millennials. While youth turnout at the polls as a percentage of the electorate increased by a point in the 2008 general election, larger gains were seen at places such as schools, soup kitchens and public lands, where 9.8 million millennials volunteered 1.87 billion hours and made up more than half of all new volunteers, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Organizations should provide a way to engage young people through service. But it is important to keep in mind that the greatest obstacle to engaging millennials other than the time they have to give, is convincing them that they can have a significant impact. Organizations should make a clear bargain as to what will come of a potential volunteer's efforts, and be able to uphold that promise if they wish to retain their millennial supporters. Social media can be an effective means to convey these ideas in a way that is appealing and understandable to young people.

Organizations should also adhere to the bedrock principles of youth engagement: inclusivity, transparency and shared decision-making. Young people want to have ownership of their causes. This is a lesson from the 2008 election that the Obama administration has attempted to replicate with its United We Serve summer initiative, providing do-it-yourself

toolkits on serve.gov for individuals to organize community service projects. A citizen-centered approach to engagement necessitates organizations not just plug in those they engage but empower them to create change where and how they see fit, according to "Citizen at the Center: A New Approach to Civic Engagement," a 2006 report of the Case Foundation.

Mobilize.org, an organization that involves young people in public policy, uses interactive keypad voting at their conferences to allow participants to set the agenda and ground rules before the real work even begins. This is key to the organization's theory of change called Democracy 2.0, defined as a more open, participatory and innovative approach to societal problem-solving (see "Democracy 2.0: Millennial-Generated Change to American Governance"). Millennials are not foot soldiers; they are leaders. Progress must be citizen-driven not organizer-dictated. Bureaucracy and hierarchy are kryptonite to this Super Generation.

With these principles in mind, organizations should concentrate on how to leverage online tools to enhance their work, building on another millennial value of technology. Important components to an effective Internet strategy include reaching young people where they already are, facilitating community and interaction, and providing ways to become involved that are not time- or labor-intensive. Successful cyber engagement is simple, scalable and social.

First, organizations must listen to the ongoing conversation and see where they can join in. The idea that "If we build it, they will come" is often digital suicide in creating an online presence. Though the exact methodology will vary by organization, being present on a variety of platforms is crucial. Creating a space where young people already are can be a simple as using a hash tag on Twitter, which brought out the crowds organizing around the Iranian election, or more complex like creating an application on Facebook, such as Causes, which gathers support for nonprofits.

Second, millennials are social creatures by nature and are attracted to spaces where they can interact with others while contributing to a certain goal. The Pickens Plan recruits supporters by letting them help shape the movement alongside other activists on its ning.com community. Because of their trust and frequent online interaction with social networks, millennials themselves become the most effective vehicles to spread a message or get others involved in a cause, a characteristic that sites such as SocialVibe are taking full advantage of. In this decentralized model, each activist or volunteer becomes a spokesperson for a particular organization to his or her peer group.

Finally, it is all about combining forces. Tasks that used to be completed by a small number of people who had a large amount of time have been handed over to a large number of people with a small amount of time. When "You" were named *Time* Person of the Year in 2006, the magazine wrote, "The new Web is a very different thing. It's a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter. ... It's really a revolution." Not only is there an inherent value in engaging more people through this kind of civic "crowdsourcing," but tasks that were once cost or labor prohibitive are now possible.

The Extraordinaries is pioneering the concept of microvolunteerism. The organization's smart-phone application allows users to complete small, skill-based tasks, such as tagging images for a museum's online collection, in their free time, such as when they are riding a bus or waiting in line at the store. The focus is on the least common denominator, requiring a small buy-in from participants while providing an opportunity for them to scale their efforts at will.

We are living in an era of civic realignment, catalyzed by new communication technologies and a generation that is reinventing the ways in which we can cooperatively solve societal issues. Given this potential, we must recognize that our society will be only as successful as the sum of the parts that are engaged, and that the new tools at our disposal will be only as effective as the entities that use them. It is incumbent upon organizations to take advantage of these and other best practices to sustain and grow citizen participation.

Nick Troiano and Chris Golden are co-founders of myimpact.org, an emerging online platform and social network for young people involved in community and national service programs. They are undergraduate students at Georgetown University and American University, respectively. This essay is adapted from a featured discussion at the National Conference on Citizenship's website, www.ncoc.net.

Emerging Themes for Effective Online Citizen Engagement

By Kim Kobza
President and CEO
Neighborhood America

Understaffed, budget-constrained agencies, generally don't perceive opportunity when asked to run large public involvement projects. We think of complex projects that often become protracted and emotionalized. With every new issue or political concern, we experience special interest groups and "smart mobs" with a passion for taking over the process. For the government professional, it all adds up to more work.

Yet federal, state and local agencies are being asked to expand their public involvement — often with new and untested social media tools. They increasingly find themselves in a new world vs. old world dilemma, with rising expectations but old world methods and process.

Here are several themes that borrow from both, and that just might make your next online public involvement process more manageable and constructive.

Purpose

The first theme is the importance of establishing a clear purpose. Why do we encourage citizen engagement — whether online or offline? Is it because we want to take the public's temperature on every issue? Do we want to make every policy question or government decision a binary thumbs up or down vote — simply without the normal rules of voting?

Or are we motivated to promote inclusive citizen engagement because we are on a hunt to discover new ideas? Do we want to draw upon a diversity of citizen experiences to discover what might go wrong in our public decisions or how to make them better?

Effective citizen engagement has to start with a clear well-defined purpose. Citizens have a need to know what is promised. What is the mission?

More than a technology project

The second theme is to focus on the human behavior that drives success. Online engagement is so often viewed as a technology project. It is not. Technology is important, but the dynamics of human communication are even more so.

Successful engagement projects are characterized by sensitivity to human motivations such as these examples:

1. **Value to the citizen.** Citizens have many noble initiatives competing for their time. Why should they choose to be involved in your initiative? What is the value to the citizen, and is it being projected? Why should they engage?
2. **Value to government.** For agencies to promote engagement, they, too, have to believe that value is being delivered. At the end of the day, how does government work better? Did citizens help?
3. **A definition of success.** Can we describe what project success means? Citizens want to make a difference. How will they know when success is achieved?
4. **Results.** What happened? How was a citizen's input considered? What impact did it have? Results drive trust.

The key is to remember that citizens are confronted with many choices. To be successful, agencies must project a value proposition for how and why citizens should get involved. Again, they must make promises and keep the promises they make.

A network perspective

The third theme is to keep a network perspective. Citizen engagement is an opportunity to leverage the power of networks. Historically, value in government processes has been created in linear processes — based on a broadcast of information. But today, so much more is possible.

Today, citizens can provide responsive input and collaborate with each other to develop new solution possibilities for some of our most vexing social problems. Knowing when, how and why to use social media is key to leveraging this collective input to improve government processes and effectiveness.

Government is characterized by an almost infinite number of decision-making processes — some internal, some external. There is no single way for citizens to be most effective in online engagement. There are many ways in which citizen networks can help government achieve its goals.

For instance, in situations involving policy issues, citizens might be asked to provide very structured comment for a limited period of time. Conversely, alternative analyses initiatives may involve multiple phases over an extended period of time, where agencies collect and publish multiple design choices and ask citizens to help narrow down these choices through public comment. Now with a manageable number of alternatives, citizens may then be invited to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each through social collaboration tools, with the ultimate goal of providing the knowledge and feedback needed to enable the agency to make the best choice possible.

Other times, government objectives rely upon the availability of resilient networks — citizen networks that can sustain a discussion over a long period of time regardless of intervening events. Examples of business problems that require resilient networks are natural disasters, health pandemics, and homeland security challenges.

The language of network science and simple principles of supporting network behaviors is now essential for government professionals who manage public engagement. The key is to remember that there is not a single network experience that solves the public communications challenge. There are many. And the most successful choices will be a function of the specific problem and citizen/user experiences that will best leverage the value of citizen input.

Understanding and elimination of barriers to citizen participation

The final theme is that we should always be cognizant of the need to remove barriers. Assuming that we establish clear expectations, and that we embrace the most appropriate form of network support, what yet stands in the way of online success? What are the remaining barriers to citizen engagement? Let me share three:

- **Time.** Agencies vie for a citizen's attention. You have a limited time to capture it. To do so, you must make your presentation interesting and unique, something that provides a compelling reason for citizens to get involved.
- **Social Fear.** Citizens are often afraid of seeming uninformed or uneducated. Fear of public embarrassment is a powerful inhibitor to public participation online involvement. This is the reason it is so important for agencies to create the right online environment that includes requirements for identity, attribution and on-topic contributions – much like that which is required in offline public comment standards.
- **Rules and regulations.** Most rules and regulations are designed to enable transactional communications — not to facilitate open dialogue with the public. Relaxing rules to invite participation and to make it easier can often be the difference between success and failure of public outreach initiatives.

As we understand and eliminate these barriers, we project a message that invites citizens in, and we make it easy to engage.

Keys to Success

By having a clear sense of purpose, sensitivity to human motivators, a network perspective, and a willingness to relax traditional rules, new online capabilities promise better, more constructive citizen engagement for every part of government.

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The Importance of Open Web Standards in the Move to Open and Transparent Government

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The World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Electronic Government Interest Group published an extensive issues paper demonstrating the variety of standards available for governments and their respective vendors or developers to use. The group is currently in the process of formulating its second year charter which will focus on open and linked government data and web interface and interoperability.

While the work necessary to produce a truly open government system is still in process, an intense level of energy is being focused on electronic government initiatives. The activities and new energy restore the confidence of many who are looking for governments to adopt open practices and technologies. The outcomes of which will enable greater levels of access and exchange between a government and its citizens.

It appears that we are on the cusp of great change, so how should we prepare our systems and staff to meet new open government directives? First, it is important to consider what Web and related technologies are necessary and how these technologies affect the ultimate success of our efforts. The goals of open government – accessibility, interoperability and citizen inclusion and interaction will require the adoption and use of open Web and technology standards. Without them, data cannot be exchanged or interoperate with other applications, Web pages cannot be rendered effectively, information cannot be shared or interpreted nor can Web pages or data be managed for the long term.

The movement to adopt openness and transparency principles and strategies, including those related to participation and engagement, is coming at a time when government entities are struggling to master Web 1.0. According to most definitions, Web 1.0 refers to Web infrastructure, including basic Web pages, Web sites, the implementation of basic search technologies and metadata schemes. The basic open Web standards for Web 1.0 should be the foundation of a government's Web infrastructure plans, to ensure the intended goals are achieved, a solid infrastructure is in place, and the demands of new technologies and opportunities are met.

Once the Web 1.0 standards are understood, governments should begin to learn and incorporate the open Web standards that allow for a richer experience via the Web. What some describe as Web 2.0 – including engagement, participation, transparency and openness – requires incorporating or extending Web 1.0 principles to allow for advanced and complex functions, and a richer and more dynamic online experience.

The W3C and many other technical standards-based organizations work diligently to identify needs, create standards, validate their use, and communicate their availability for the technical community. Standards

It appears that we are on the cusp of great change, so how should we prepare our systems and staff to meet new open government directives?

organizations, including the W3C, are now applying resources to standards development that help meet government's unique needs. Standards available today include those for achieving technically sound Web sites, accessibility, interoperability, multichannel delivery, and open and linked data. These standards include AJAX, HTML, CSS, XHR, and ECMA script for richer and deeper interface experiences, while RDFa, Semantics, ontologies, XBRL, XML provide structure and formats for exposing, linking, and making data available. Current open Web standards recommendations from the W3C are supported by many browsers, services and applications.

Future standards and frameworks include those to allow and manage authentication, identification and long-term data and information management. Authentication and identification standards and technologies will allow citizens to use one ID to securely access all of their information held by or available from a government. Long-term data and information management standards will ensure that the technologies and applications supporting

information, data, and knowledge of today are preserved and available for future generations.

As global Web developers design next generation pages and applications that use mash-ups and complex utilities, Web standards will help preserve the longevity of the pages, applications and data found within for today and for tomorrow. Web standards and associated validation tools, such as W3C's HTML validator (http://validator.w3.org/), are available for creating Web pages according to approved HTML standards recommendations. Also available are guidelines and standards to help organizations meet its Section 508 accessibility requirements, providing all users the opportunity to interact with and receive information and service regardless of physical or mental barriers to accessing Web content.

Standards associated with interoperability, including XML and XBRL, allow applications to communicate and share data with each other. Some government systems leverage proprietary or legacy applications that to do not follow interoperability best practices. Some are new but were implemented without open data formats or the thought that another agency or government may want to share data or display it on the Web. Data going in are often difficult to get out of the system, let alone share with other applications. Without the use of interoperability standards, the governments will not be able to share all that they aspire to nor all that the public desires.

Standards associated with multichannel delivery, and those focused on mobile devices and browsers, allow communication through devices not resident or interacting with a PC. Multichannel delivery includes information and services delivered to interactive televisions, kiosks, and mobile and phone devices. The mobile device market now includes many vendors and types of devices, each with a different mobile browser installed. Using open mobile Web standards allows an organization to have information and services display and function on a majority of known browsers, not just those commonly used by consumers to browse the Web. The use of these standards ensures that the greatest number of users possible can receive and interact with government online.

Today's world is becoming hyperconnected. Mobile devices are proliferating, and more and more users are expecting to access services and information via mobile and other devices. The demand will only grow, making open Web standards more critical as the Web continues to grow and the services continue to proliferate.

Standards are increasingly important to the effort given the amount and different types of data that will be made available via the Web. Standards also allow us to make data discoverable and provide insight and context to those seeking information.

In using the variety of open Web standards available, governments can ensure that they have the technical infrastructure and architecture that allow data, information, and services to be made available via the Web, mobile devices, and applications. Today's efforts and activities offer great promise. Electronic government is finally here. Let's make sure that we pay attention to the important infrastructure items to make the dreams, ideas, and efforts a stable and fruitful reality.

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The W3C document, Improving Access to Government through Better Use of the Web, *is online at: http://www.w3.org/TR/egov-improving/*

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