

The Dilemma of Online Participation

The Case of the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan

Presented At

Keeping up with Communication Technology:

An Online Workshop on the Practical Use of Social Media

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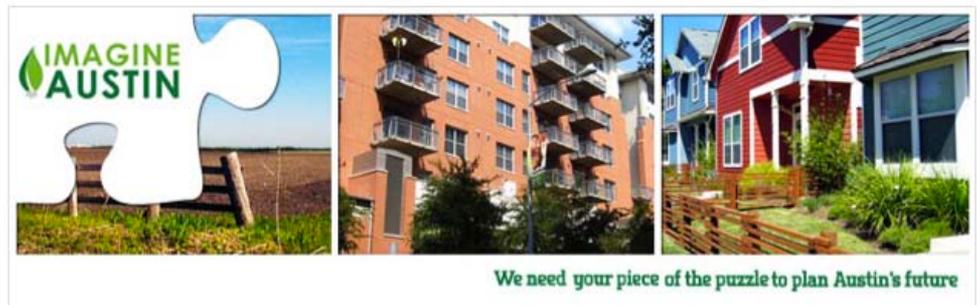
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Key Questions

1. What are the **goals** can you accomplish with social media?
2. Which **citizens** will you reach, and how do your actions determine who you will reach?
3. What **unintended effects** will social media use have in your projects?
4. What lessons can we draw when creating **social media plans**?

Findings based on case study of Austin Comprehensive Plan that compared interaction and participation through:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Website and blog
- Online survey
- Public and private meetings
- Mail Survey
- Others



What Goals Can You Accomplish With Social Media?

□ Participation (normative goals, from Fung 2006)

- Legitimacy
 - Seek views
- Effectiveness
 - Local knowledge
 - Innovative ideas

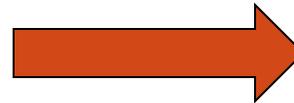


Social media are not well suited to these goals

- Justice
 - Create pressure for officials to act a certain way (Also Needleman, Arnstein)
- Individual participant outcomes (learning, empowerment)
- Community outcomes (empowerment, civic capacity)

□ Marketing (instrumental goals)

- Publicity
- Branding
- Manipulation
- *May be justified in the context of a normative goal*



Social media are excellent at these goals

What Citizens Will You Reach?

- How similar are participants to the community?
 - **Demographic** profile may be different from the public, but not different than existing public meeting attendees
 - For large-scale participatory processes, **views** are more similar, despite demographic differences
- What can you do to reach representative audiences?
 - Pick social media networks **popular** in your community
 - Use **languages** spoken in the community
 - Use **recruitment** to conduct outreach in underrepresented community

% of population	American Community Survey, 2006-2008	Community Forum Series (N=1,240)	Online Participants (N=65)
Female	48%	58%	56%
Hispanic	35%	12%	9%
Under 29	n/a	20%	21%
65 and older	7%	7%	11%
High school or less	35%	5%	4%
Household income less than \$25,000	23%	10%	8%

What unintended effects will social media use have in your projects?

- The dilemma of online participation
 - Online tools expand the number of participants
 - May may amplify the voices of the highly engaged
- Citizens may assume you are listening or not understand policy context to provide useful input

Public Meetings	Number of participants
Citizen Task Force Meetings	70
Community Forum Meetings	316
Meeting-In-a-Box	300
Kick-off Open House	270
Other presentation	n/a
Online Participation	
Facebook page	1,185
Twitter	124
Online survey	2,247
Website	n/a
Other	
Mail Survey	1,140



What lessons can we draw when creating social media plans?

- If seeking views, local knowledge, ideas:
 - Use **smarter participation** through careful use of social media or specialized tools
 - Do what is required to **listen** to online input (registration, etc)
- **Coordinate** online strategy with offline opportunities
- Underrepresented groups can be reached through methods that take into account **resources**, existing **engagement**, and **recruitment**
- Too broad messages are not motivating, citizens require **specific contextual information** about exact topic of plan or policy to provide desired input (Comp. Plans)

Works Cited

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Full paper available on website: *The Dilemma of Online Participation: Comprehensive Planning in Austin, Texas*