

THE CASE FOR BLENDED CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT: OFFLINE AND ONLINE

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Imagine you are a city employee thinking of new ways to create goodwill between your city police department and citizens. Would you create a series of in-person meet-and-greets between the police department and the community or would you go to social media and create a hashtag for citizens to freely comment on why they love the police department and post pictures? Would you do both? In April 2014, the NYPD asked Twitter users to post photos of themselves with officers while using the hashtag *#myNYPD*. The idea backfired.¹ Twitter users largely used the hashtag for negative comments about the NYPD, highlighting instances of police brutality and misconduct.² That day, the NYPD attempted to engage their citizens quickly and swiftly but fell short and experienced a public embarrassment. New York City, not unlike many cities, set out to traverse the seemingly murky waters of online and offline citizen engagement and learned a valuable lesson about what it takes to truly engage citizens.

Today we see a chasm between two platforms for citizen engagement: offline and online participation. Traditionally, we're most familiar with face-to-face citizen engagement in the form of town-hall meetings, neighborhood associations, and school board meetings. These traditional platforms are good as they have been resilient to a certain degree and continue to operate. Many of these platforms were developed at a time when the world was much simpler. Societies were smaller, homogenous, and distances were small and everything was local. People had time to attend these meetings and attending these meetings was seen as a vital avenue to connect with your local friends and neighbors to better the community and inform governance.

In generations before, when citizens wanted to support an issue or challenge an issue, they engaged directly with their local government as it was the only way to make their voice heard. For instance, in the fight for civil rights legislation in the 1960s, proponents of the cause held sits-ins, marches, letter writing campaigns, demonstrations, boycotting, and forums. Opponents of the cause also publicly engaged their local government by hosting rallies, protests, forums, and meetings. These forms of engagement were about meeting in the community and connecting to fellow community members as well as local government.

Today, things are different. Citizen engagement is different. The internet has come about and shifted the way individuals engage with one another. This is so because the internet has spurred innovations that have impacted all aspects of our lives. Citizen engagement was forever changed since the early days of e-government when technology mediated our interaction with public agencies. With the growth of Web 2.0 technologies, citizens have had new opportunities to connect with each other. The Brookings Institute reported that the digital revolution, that is the proliferation of information and communication technologies, has expanded in both reach and complexity.³ According to the Pew Research Global Attitudes project, mobile phone growth rates are increasing exponentially in most countries.⁴ This means that individuals in most areas of the world have greater access to information and their government than ever before.

“The World is Flat” proclaimed Tom Friedman.⁵ Others note that the world might be a bit spiky.⁶ Regardless, what we do know is online social networks and other innovations have engaged individuals and have hooked them. For instance, in Cleveland, Ohio, bike advocates are using the Streetmix app to suggest design improvements to city planners.⁷ In most cities, 311 apps are nothing new. However, in Philadelphia, their 311 app offers additional engagement features that allow citizens to submit service tickets that explains a needed improvement as well as posts the requests on a website where residents can see all of the activity in the city.⁸ In addition to the ability to view all incoming requests, citizens are able

to engage with others by answering other users' questions. Pew's Philadelphia Research Initiative found that Philadelphia's 311 succeeded in its first year by giving residents improved and easier access to information and did so at low cost.⁹

It is clear that the information and communication technologies (ICTs) are not just an occasional tool to communicate. Internet-based technologies are the primary mediums we use to entertain ourselves, work, and communicate. On March 12, 2014, the World Wide Web turned 25 years old. Since its inception, it has become one of the most important and heavily used parts of society. The Pew Research Internet Project found that in the U.S. 87% of American adults use the internet with near saturation usage among those living in households earning \$75,000 or more (99%), young adults ages 18-29 (97%), and those with college degrees (97%). 68% of adults connect to the internet with a mobile device such as a smartphone or tablet.¹⁰ Make no mistake, citizens are using ICTs to connect with government and each other.

The heightened use of technology in local government has shifted the relationship between cities and their constituents. Thanks to technology, the world is more global now and individuals have the opportunity to connect with others internationally and tune in to other cities across the world. More people are interested in global issues rather than local issues. Examples of this are in the online phenomena, crowdsourcing and microfinancing. Crowdsourcing is a distributed problem-solving model that allows users located anywhere to engage in the development of solutions.¹¹ In April 2013, directly after the Boston Marathon bombing, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) asked citizens to submit photos and videos from the scene of the bombing, in addition to usual requests for information leading to possible suspects. Before the FBI could establish a site for citizens to upload information, others had already done so. Elsewhere on the internet, the online communities Reddit and 4Chan were also asking for citizens to submit photos and videos and were performing their own detective work by annotating images of 'suspicious' individuals.¹² The latter was largely incorrect and caused some individuals to be falsely accused of detonating the bomb. This situation is indicative of what cities deal with. The internet makes information global knowledge and open for global consumption and interference.

Microfinancing is a financing service for entrepreneurs who do not have access to capital or bank services. Microfinance is often used to help fund poor individuals who, if provided access to financial services, will assist in bringing them out of poverty and spur economic development. Organizations such as Kiva allow individuals around the world to make a loan. For instance, Reuben Mpunda borrowed \$360 to help pay municipal fees and purchase three trucks to sell clean water. His output increased up to over 1100% and his profits increased nearly six times.¹³ This type of engagement is useful and helpful but it lacks interpersonal engagement within local communities.

This lack of interpersonal engagement has been a revolving theme when discussing community and engagement. Robert Putnam discussed in his popular book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*,¹⁴ the disengagement of Americans from civic participation which has taken the form of low voter turnout, local public meeting attendance, and poor political involvement and the loss of social capital. He derides the increasing loss of membership in civic organizations. He equates the decline of membership in social and civic organization to the decline of bowling leagues which, at one time, were a place where members of the community could come together in fellowship. He blames much of this disengagement on the rise of television. He notes that in the course of fellowshiping with one another, social capital was being raised as members bowled and discussed city issues, political issues, and familial issues and coming up with actions to improve their lives. Today, fewer individuals are bowling together and fewer individuals are working with their community members to find solutions to community issues.

Due to this reality, the differences between offline citizen engagement (physical engagement) and online citizen engagement online (virtual) are growing. The newer form of engagement- online engagement- is a renegotiation of the roles between citizens and their communities and communities and their local

government. In essence, online engagement is mostly transactional rather than transformational. Transactional engagement traditionally calls for actions that are usually broad-based, easy, and fast. For instance, this can be cities requesting a small donation via text message or signing an online petition. The City of Tampa, Florida released a mobile app for citizens offering information and services. Residents can report potholes, request signs be removed from a neighborhood, or request the installation of new street lights.¹⁵ A mobile app such as this is important and extremely relevant to residents but it does not aid in building trust and relationships with citizens. It offers citizens and the local government the ability to make small transactions for convenience.

Transformational engagement engages citizens in dynamic cycles of learning and action and requires deeper engagement and longer participation.¹⁶ The City of Brea, California has engaged its residents for 20 years in community decisions. 20 years ago, residents participated in a city-wide re-visioning process for the first time where city officials implemented many of the suggestions. Currently, a neighborhood ombudsman convenes groups regularly to gain resident input on developments and revitalizations.¹⁷ Today, however, local governments are looking for ways to cut costs and deliver better services to their constituents. Many of their efforts towards citizen engagement are geared toward becoming more functional. This is not to say that cities still aren't engaging with citizens for solutions to problems but it does mean that the process of engagement looks a lot different than in the past.

It is clear that there is a chasm between offline and online engagement. We engage differently across platforms. And, more importantly, citizen engagement means different things. Is this cause for concern? We think so.

Different Platform, Different Citizens

What is most concerning is that when we think of governance, there are two distinct spaces emerging, each of which is trying to solve local challenges, yet each disconnected. Offline and online forms of engagement are adversarial to one another. The online platforms condemn the arcane nature of the offline platforms, while proponents of offline platforms do not take the credibility of online platforms seriously. This can be explained partly because each platform attracts different kinds of citizens.

First, there are four demographic characteristics that have been shown to be strongly associated with participation: income, education, gender, and personality.¹⁸ This is so because, generally, people need time, money, and communicational abilities to truly participate and engage in civic activities. These things are easier to acquire with higher income and education. Also, digital natives- individuals who have grown up without knowing a world before cell phones or internet- have a different view of engagement. Participation for digital natives originates from peer-to-peer relationships that promote engagement and a quest for self-actualization.¹⁹ This means that digital natives who get involved in citizen engagement are doing so to fulfill an intrinsic need. This is in contrast to the traditional view of the engaged citizen participating because it is his or her civic duty.

Second, engagement depends on organizational membership such as church membership and neighborhood associations. Robert Putnam acknowledges that some forms of civic participation may be more important than others but notes that any form of social connections has positive social consequences. Third, individuals' attitudes also play a role in their level and type of engagement.²⁰ For instance, Harlow and Cantor found a positive link between life satisfaction and civic engagement and noted that when citizens are more content in life, they tend to want to help others.²¹ This point ties into the previous point, individuals find happiness and contentment when they are engaged in social connections within their community. That contentment offers them the emotional capacity to work with and help others, enjoy fellowship, and commit to causes. Consider the goodwill performed by church groups who are civically engaged in their local communities as well as abroad in mission trips.

In general, the two kinds of platforms attract different kinds of citizens. Offline users are traditionally older and have more strong ties to the community. Online users are youthful digital natives and young professionals who possess weaker community ties. For offline engagement, live, face-to-face meetings and events hold the promise of deeper connectivity and a growing sense of community. Think of what happens when you attend a meeting. After the business has been concluded, individuals might stay a little longer to chat about things that may not be specifically related to the meeting, such as children's extracurricular activities in common, recipes, job opportunities, and the like. For instance, communities in Brazil have innovated the practice of participatory budgeting- a process of budgeting that delegates decision-making authority directly to citizens often in local politics. In cities throughout Brazil, citizens meet to discuss community needs and discuss resource applications. This is done to enhance transparency, reduce government inefficiencies, and enhance citizen engagement.²²

The Cost of Engagement

Citizen engagement entails tangible and intangible costs, each having their own merits and consequences. Costs to local government can include monetary expense such as maintaining a website or paying for materials at a meeting, and intangible costs such as public trust and participation. For citizens, citizen participation can cost money such as transportation to and from meetings and intangible cost such as building relationships with other community members and becoming familiar with local government leadership. For instance, when citizens connect online, often, the conversation revolves around the issue and that is it. There is no time to walk to your car with a person you just met while chatting or an opportunity to go for ice cream afterwards. Thus, online engagement might offer citizens lower monetary cost in transportation or babysitting cost, but could have intangible consequences due to the lower human interaction such as limited knowledge of word-of-mouth opportunities and developing a strong, local social network.

Although human interaction is lower in online engagement, this platform has its own benefits. Online platforms create virtual worlds where individuals can come together to solve a problem through leveraging their collective intelligence. For instance, St. Paul, Minnesota uses BeNeighbors.org as an e-democracy²³ project that is an online space where neighbors can meet and participate in over 35 'Neighbors Forums' to discuss community issues.²⁴ This type of engagement allows citizens to engage in matters that are specific to them. Oftentimes, people stay away from traditional, offline engagement because time is a factor and many issues discussed in a given city council or neighborhood association do not pertain or interest them.

Conversely, offline is costly, one must take the time to attend meetings and interact with community members. For instance, online anyone can set up methods of feedback and improvement and does not have to follow processes; offline they have to follow established protocols (e.g. submit documents for hearings, committee meetings, etc.). Online is more agile and nimble, offline is not. Online, however, is no panacea – most online platforms do not survive beyond initial launch. Many receive huge burst of early attention, but then it is hard to sustain participation. According to Localytics, 20% of downloaded apps are used only once.²⁵ This means that with competition of gaming, news, music, health & fitness, weather, sports, and photography apps, local government apps have to be engaging enough to hold users' attention.

Overall, both platforms have tangible and intangible costs. Anyone could make a case for why town hall meetings are more expensive than maintaining an app or why more efficiency should be the aim of local government. What tips the scale and leads a local government down one path is their desire and goals. If the goal is to engage quickly and gather information quickly, one might lean towards online. If the desire is long, sustained participation with no pressing goal other than to maintain engagement, one might lean towards offline.

Goals of Engagement

The goals of citizen engagement are what drive usage of either platform. Offline is more about building long-term participation and creating communities that can go beyond solving just one problem to becoming a community of problem solvers. However, this mentality is contingent upon demographics. A 2008 study found that citizen involvement in community problems is greater in poorer countries than in richer countries.²⁶ These findings suggest that people in poorer countries tend to provide more support for their own communities to overcome the effects of the lack of resources. In essence, they use their social capital to manage and solve their community problems.

Online, the collective intelligence of citizens is what is being leveraged. There is a level of activism in how interactions happen, and the results are often ‘let’s implement this even assuming the government cannot help.’ For example, online platforms allow people to contribute on their own time and there is little cost of engagement. For instance, in St. Louis, Missouri, citizens were forced to wait five hours or more at some polling locations due to long lines. In response to this, voters kept each other apprised of the polling lines by using the Twitter hashtag *#Votereport*.²⁷ This, again, allows citizens to have a swift, one-time interaction with their community.

The goal of offline engagement is also to garner more citizen-to-government engagement. For instance, in Washington, D.C., the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Action organized a biannual strategic planning process that links citizen input to budgetary decisions. In Los Angeles, California, Neighborhood Councils were put in place to reduce political apathy and foster a culture of participatory and responsive local government. In Baltimore, Maryland and Chicago, Illinois, neighborhood policing programs were developed to help reduce crime and lower cost.²⁸

Online engagement promotes more citizen-to-citizen engagement. Citizen-to-citizen engagement allows for social capital to be built which contributes to increased membership association and willingness to engage more. For instance, the Michigan Corps’ Detroit4Detroit initiative allows citizen philanthropists to find projects they find interesting and then use the website to reach out to friends and colleagues in their own networks to raise funds.²⁹ The coupling of engagement with membership association is a great strength of this platform.

Moving Towards a Blended Strategy of Engagement

So, which engagement platform is best? We would have to say that both have their merits, and, when used together, they can be absolutely dynamic. What we need is a hybrid, of sorts; research has shown that a blended learning strategy that leverages the best of both worlds is beneficial.³⁰ There are instances where a blended strategy has worked. For instance, the Occupy Wall Street movement was a large-scale protest of social and economic inequality that used both online and offline strategies to gain awareness and participation. The organizers used traditional offline methods of occupation, civil disobedience, picketing, and demonstrations and large-scale internet activism across social media platforms. Insufficient on their own, each method of engagement contributed to the success of Occupy Wall Street.

There are several factors that should be considered when undertaking a blended strategy for citizen engagement. First, class differences, especially those related to education attainment, play a role in online or offline engagement. According to Pew Research, younger, higher-income, and more highly educated seniors use the internet at rates approaching or exceeding the general population.³¹ Second, social media usership is growing. According to Pew Research, 73% of adults now use some kind of social networking; Facebook being the most common.³² Information, including opinions and rumors circulate quickly on social media which can be beneficial or detrimental to a city (i.e. *#myNYPD* backfire). Third, even though many conversations happen online, many citizens still chose to work in traditional civic engagement settings.

Here, we offer an action strategy that merges the best attributes of each platform to create an optimal level of civic engagement:

- 1) **Understand the features and nuances of both mediums** as both are equally important, for different reasons. The two mediums should effectively complement one another and lead to improved engagement in both quality and quantity. For instance, the City of Austin, Texas sought to increase citizen engagement by using a blended strategy for a planning effort called Imagine Austin.³³ First, they allowed community groups to use their own meetings to discuss questions that planners wanted to ask. For instance, the city engaged the help of African-American pastors and the Asian Chamber of Commerce to pose questions to their constituents and gather concerns. Second, they placed ads on Univision, the Spanish-language television network. Third, they hosted numerous workshops. Finally, they used social media to reach younger residents and developed the online site, SpeakUpAustin³⁴, to solicit ideas and encourage feedback. In the end, 18,000 people got involved in the plan.³⁵
- 2) **Choose the most appropriate medium for citizen engagement** based on what you know works best. Knowing the benefits of each platform is important to building a smart strategy for the type of engagement you are looking for. For instance, we know that for feedback on a small group of options, on a localized topic, offline participation is best. In Sarasota, Florida, the local government partnered with an independent nonprofit to begin dialoguing about city issues such as traffic congestion, high school dropout rates, mental health, family violence, and community change. For topics so sensitive and personal to local citizens, meeting face-to-face to discuss the issues instead of placing the topics on open forums online was best.³⁶
- 3) **Encourage individuals who are comfortable in one space (online/offline) to engage in the other space** to increase engagement. It is true that comfort with one medium has a lot to do with the demographics of the individual but reaching across both domains can be extremely beneficial. For instance, the online petition site, MoveOn.org, was created by two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who were incensed by the partisan grandstanding present in the Clinton/Lewinsky affair.³⁷ In 1998, they launched an online petition called “Censure President Clinton and Move On to Pressing Issues Facing the Nation.” By the end of the year, there were over four million petitioners. The creators found that the site was a place for like-minded individuals and they began to complement their online offerings with offline opportunities. For instance, they raised money for then-Presidential candidate John Kerry, hosted mass bake sales which raised over \$750,000 on one Saturday, concerts with stars such as Bruce Springsteen and the Dixie Chicks, and mass visits to the viewing of Michael Moore’s film *Fahrenheit 9/11*.³⁸
- 4) Organizational goals, mission, and themes should **be consistent across platforms**. Everything offered to the public should be considered smaller related pieces of your bigger goal of citizen engagement. Citizens are cross-referencing information regularly and they also become more familiar with the organization if the agency website, social media profiles, and calendars are all linked to one another. Online information can impact offline behavior. For instance, a voter might learn more about a politician running for office by ‘Liking’ their Facebook page and following them on twitter. As more information is being shared with the voter, trust is being built. If there are slight or large inconsistencies, the voter will lose trust and it could result in the politician losing out on a donation or a vote.³⁹
- 5) **Do not judge the participation on one platform to be more credible than the other** as each platform has its merits. Much of what comes out of citizen engagement turns out to be information used in decision-making. Leaders shouldn’t establish both platforms and only use one source of feedback because it is most agreeable with his or her ideals of what is credible. We must value both platforms and validate the efforts of both groups. Both platforms can complement one another but public managers have to implement both fairly to allow each to be as credible as possible.

However, it is easy for individuals to be biased towards one platform. The trust, reliability, and believability in the online world are often questioned. Take for instance, a Twitter discussion on a city issue and a tweeter with an inappropriate handle sharing their thoughts through short-hand, abrasive language and misspellings. Although that citizens' thoughts should be just as valid as a person visiting a city council meeting, their opinion often is not as accepted.

Unintended Consequences

In any type of citizen engagement, there are inevitable unintended consequences that accompany any act of engaging large volumes of people in decision-making or feedback loops. About five years ago, President Obama launched a crowdsourcing, open government website that requested citizens to suggest the most pressing public policy issues and vote on them based on the importance of the issue. The forum was, in essence, hijacked by fringe groups who made the legalization of Marijuana one of the most popular proposals.⁴⁰ Opponents of the President criticized him for allowing this to happen and it was looked at as an embarrassment of the initiative. In addition, many questioned the true 'wisdom of crowds.'

Unintended consequences often happen when solution strategies are complex and those solutions interact with present circumstances. Civic engagement is an endeavor with unpredictable outcomes. There is a lack of control that local governments have and that unpredictability can drive good outcomes, bad outcomes, and, most importantly, learning outcomes.⁴¹

The proliferation of new technologies coupled with older, more traditional forms of citizen engagement has brought the necessity to merge the two into the forefront. The truth is, the convergence of online and offline citizen engagement techniques is happening. It is happening whether local governments want to acknowledge it. By acknowledging the convergence of the two, local governments are making a concerted effort to use a blended strategy that takes the best aspects of both and uses the outcome to their benefit.

Researchers have discovered that people use information from mass communication (such as online media) and interpersonal communication (such as face-to-face meetings) to form a comprehensive understanding about phenomena.⁴² Blending the two for increased citizen engagement is both a challenge and opportunity for local governments. In any case, local governments must remember that both platforms are about information and feedback. Both online and offline information seeking can make up for where the other lacks.

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