

MOBILIZING DIGITAL VOICES: INTEGRATING SOCIAL MEDIA INTO THE
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

by

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MOBILIZING DIGITAL VOICES

**Integrating
social media into the
public
engagement toolkit**

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Executive Summary

Social media is not a passing fad. It represents a fundamental shift in how humans are communicating with each other, and will likely be integral to the field of public engagement. Many of our personal interactions are transitioning from a monologue (one-to-one or one-to-many) to a *polylogue* (many-to-many) society, where all participants of a conversation have the opportunity to give and receive information.

This report focuses on social media as a powerful tool for public engagement specialists, and how it can be effectively integrated into the current planning toolkit. In it, I present findings from my experience managing and researching the 2011 Do It In The Dark Energy Saving Challenge (DIITD). These findings lead me to develop a list of recommendations for the proper use of social media as a mode and pathway in competition engagement. I also infer from my findings and experience how social media can benefit civic-oriented engagement processes.

By reading this report, engagement specialists and planners might develop an understanding of social media by relating to the questions I pose, and will get a clearer sense of how to integrate it into their current practices.

In using traditional engagement practices, we are often not reaching a representative fraction of all cultural, economic, and demographic groups in our communities, but social media can help with this. I am hopeful that this report will help to dispel some myths and assumptions about social media, and contribute to building a real understanding of its value in engaging with the public.

Acknowledgements

Effective communication and community development are two things that I am passionate about. I'm also passionate about energy conservation, team environments, using media to work with youth, and bringing other passionate people together to focus on finding solutions to climate change. Incredibly, all of these elements came together to create the most educational and enjoyable experience I've had at university. My unending thanks goes to the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions and all of our research participants and competitors, without whom none of this would have been realized. Throughout the process of researching and writing this report, I have been surrounded by thoughtful, intelligent, and supportive people, but four people in particular have helped guide it to completion.

Maged, your support and guidance have been unwavering, and your humour is invaluable. You are a true mentor, and an equal. There is so much more for me to learn from you.

Jon, your knowledge and friendship has made our work together such a positive learning experience, and your trust has enabled me to develop into a professional.

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Claire, your honesty guides me, your encouragement inspires me, and your love sustains me. My thanks for you is simply immeasurable.

A note about this report

The work presented here is one of several outputs of a research project funded by the Pacific Institute of Climate Solutions Social Mobilization Sub-committee. The project was entitled From Communities of Interest to Communities of Practice: Digital Media as Catalysts for Climate Action Campaigns. The project planned, facilitated, orchestrated and funded an energy reduction competition amongst approximately 6500 campus residents in 6 universities across BC to reduce their energy consumption and to participate in energy reduction challenges. The work presented here is one of several outputs of the project and is deliberately intended to address a planning audience on the challenges and opportunities of using digital and social media for the service of public engagement. The project team included Maged Senbel, Jon Frantz, Metha Brown, Victor Ngo and myself. Metha was the initial coordinator of the project and I took over her role before the start of the competition through to the analysis and writing phases. Each team member had different roles and responsibilities throughout the project but we worked collaboratively and discussed our thoughts and ideas extensively. Many of the ideas presented here are best attributed to the team and to team discussions. Some of the survey design and analysis originated with the team and are not my own, however, the majority of the analysis presented here is my own, and the synthesis of the results, ideas and findings is distinct from other outputs of the project.

Images

Unless otherwise noted, images in this report are the property of our research team. Some images are blurred to protect the privacy of participants.

Mobilizing Digital Voices: Integrating Social Media into the Public Engagement Toolkit

Preamble

This report focuses on social media as a powerful tool for public engagement specialists, but it does not pit social media against in-person interaction to see which one is a more effective vehicle for mobilizing the public to act on issues like climate change. If we can agree that a major value of engagement is in achieving public discourse, then integrating social media into current digital and analog engagement methods simply broadens the preferred modes that the public can use to communicate legitimately with planning agencies and engagement specialists.

Let's recognize the need for multiple forms of communication pathways to meet the needs of society and build a set of tools that we can pit against a lack of mobilization on serious issues like climate change.

How important is social media to citizens of Earth? Right now, there are more than 1 billion social media profiles on the internetⁱ - with probably a few hundred more since you started reading. Over 850 million people are on Facebook, and 50% of them check in at least once every 24 hours to look at some of the 250 million photos uploaded every dayⁱⁱ. At least 17.6 million Canadians are on the world's most popular social network (67%)ⁱⁱⁱ, and in the last six months, new sign-ups equaled the combined population of Saskatoon, Regina and Kingston (over 500,000!)^{iv}. There are over 1.2 million users in Montreal, over 770,000 in Vancouver, and over 1.8 million in Toronto^v. And this is just Facebook.

If you were to read one blog for every kilometer you traveled to the moon¹, you'd have to go there and back 417 times to read them all!² Wordpress blogs alone would take you 132 trips³, and this number doubled in the last year^{vi}.

There is no doubt that social networking is the fastest growing online behaviour, rising from 36% of global internet users to 59% by the end of 2011^{vii}. Last year, daily sales of social network-ready

¹ That's about 384,000km

² That's about 173 million blogs

³ That's a little over 54 million blogs

smart phones exceeded global daily births^{4viii}. Vimeo saw over 4.1 million new users in 2011^{ix}, and every day a decade-worth of continuous video footage is uploaded to Youtube (or one hour of footage every second)^x, with approximately 60 million unique hits to Youtube in Canada... every day^{xi}.

So it appears that social media, in its evolving forms, has become a force for social communication and self-expression. With that said, I would like to explore one question that most people are wondering: What exactly *is* social media?

Since social media is self-defined based on how we - the user - choose to interact with it, there are as many definitions as there are users. Reduced to a simple statement, it might be defined as *people communicating with each other online*, but expanding on this is helpful to understand *why* and *who* social media is made for. In his ebook *What is Social Media?* Antony Mayfield^{xii} distilled the elements of pure social media into five core characteristics that I very much like, and have built on here:

- **Participation** - contributions from everyone, to anyone
- **Openness** - the fewer barriers to access, the more it gets used
- **Conversation** - a shift from monologue (one-to-one or one-to-many) to *polylogue*^{xiii} (*many-to-many*), social media transmits between people instead of broadcasting at people
- **Community** - the time and space of human connection collapses and expands to create communities of interest anywhere, anytime
- **Connectedness** - communities share information and resources in many forms including multimedia, links, websites, blogs, clouds, and people.

⁴ Global daily smart-phone sales are over 400,000, and global daily births are about 300,000

Taking the above elements, and knowledge from my recent research, I define ‘social media’ as: *The user-created video, audio, still-image, text or multimedia that are used as social interaction tools to openly share facts, opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives between participants, communities, and organizations for a multitude of purposes.*

This definition of social media also provides some insight into how I have approached trying to understand social media. I see it as a mechanism that can enable interaction with, and between, community members, and I see it as a networking tool that is always evolving. That is why this report is not going to teach you exactly which social media applications to use. By the time this has been written, printed and finds your hands, most of the tools that existed during the research process will have evolved into new tools, merged with other tools, integrated into a larger application, or have become obsolete to part or most of the community members that use them, with the likely exception of Facebook (although even Facebook will likely look and work differently).

Fortunately, knowing exactly which tools to use to connect, organize and communicate is far less important than knowing how to integrate and expand the modes of communication to match citizens' preferences for communication. If people in your community are already using social media, then they will be the experts that will inform you about which tools you should be using. Instead, this report will inform you about why social media is important in building public voice, how you should integrate it into your toolkit, and who will help you manage it effectively.

Navigating this report

In what follows, I have organized the sections into a format that will help you to navigate between research findings and recommendations that can be integrated into engagement practice. The findings are organized under broad questions I have asked about social media in sections 3.1 and 3.2. I organize the recommendations by explaining *why* each one is important, and *how* you can integrate them into your practice.

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1.0 Introduction

This report is based on my experience managing and researching the 2011 Do It In The Dark Energy Saving Challenge (DIITD). DIITD uses events programming and competition between university campus residences to promote the reduction of energy consumption. In the past, DIITD competitions held in Canada and North America focused on social marketing and in-person events programming to educate competitors on techniques for saving energy.

When our research team took on project management of the 2011 competition, I wanted to know what role social media should take in engaging with communities in a competition. Since my training is in planning, I also wanted to make this information useful to planners and public engagement specialists, so going into this project I began to ask questions that might inform their practice: Should social media be *the* method of engagement? Does it facilitate mobilization? Does it create opportunities for civic engagement? Should it operate on its own, or as part of a larger engagement strategy? Should it be used as a tool for connecting and organizing people? For having discourse? To sum it up, will social media help citizens to connect, share and speak out about public issues like climate change?

My research did what most research does, it revealed the complexity of the issue, and left me with many new questions. But it also provided me with some very important answers, answers that are absolutely vital for those wondering about-, skeptical of-, or seeking to use- social media to build networks around a topic and engage with communities.

2.0 The history and development of Do It In The Dark

The DIITD competition brand and programming was created in late 2005 at Williams College by the climate action team. It quickly became a yearly tradition at the college, and has spread to dozens of other colleges in North America. The competition made it to BC in the fall of 2010, when UBC's Totem Residence competed against 39 other universities in the US-held Campus Conservation Nationals. Totem Park placed second overall and saved over 9000 kWh of energy, preventing the emission of 750kg of greenhouse gases. The success of the competition created the drive to continue it in 2011, when our research team partnered with goBEYOND to redesign and implement the competition at six BC university campuses.

Energy saving is a vital action that over-consuming societies must consider in order to reduce the current load needed to fuel our infrastructure, movement, and lifestyles. On one level, DIITD focuses on these actions as reachable, feel-good targets that individuals can mobilize around. As mentioned above, previous DIITD competitions used online energy feedback technology, and focused their programming around in-person group events. This strategy has proven to be effective at saving energy, and so we wanted to develop ways to elevate discussion and understanding about the relationship between energy conservation and climate change.

As a result, the competition in 2011 included a massive redesign in how participants interacted with each other and the competition activities. Originally, DIITD was designed purely to encourage energy savings at the meter as a way to measure public uptake of energy conservation programming. In DIITD 2011, we wanted to provide programming and incentives that would encourage individual participation so that we could evaluate how the individual participates and engages with the content, how they would interact with the competition challenges, and what effect a mixed mode communications strategy would have on encouraging engagement.

To do this, we employed a social media platform called My Everyday Earth (MEE). MEE is an application that is integrated into Facebook, allowing users to connect their Facebook social profiles to a network of participants across the province who were also using the app. The application hosted four types of challenges that participants could engage with, and received points at the individual, residence and campus level for completing. The purpose of this was to provide multiple

pathways to engagement, where participants would compete using a mix of different digital modes, as well as taking action offline. Each challenge was unique in its objectives and encouraged new ways to engage with energy saving and climate change issues. The app also awarded points for each action that was taken. Below is a screenshot from the MEE app homepage showing the points standings for each campus at one point in the competition.



The decision to use an application that was already integrated into Facebook was a logical choice for a few reasons:

- Facebook is the most widely used social media site in Canada, and the largest demographic of users are in the 18-24 age range^{xiv}. It was likely that more participants were on Facebook than any other social media hub.
- Facebook acts as an external hub of communications that connects the information of each user in MEE to their own network of Facebook friends. The integration acts as a catalyst for spreading the word about MEE to the local community of campus residents who are on Facebook.

- Facebook group pages were created for each campus, where information about challenges and events were collected and displayed. In this way, the entire community of participants could 'like' a campus page and send and receive information about DIITD between groups without requiring other contact information.
- Users who already had Facebook were able to access the software without having to become familiar with another social media platform, and were not asked to download any new software directly onto their computer, keeping the competition interface accessible but not invasive.
- Daily check-ins on Facebook is a characteristic behaviour of 50%^{xv} of its users, so we inferred that this would improve the likelihood that daily MEE check-ins would become habitual as well.

2.1 Partnerships

Our research team worked closely with the following partners to coordinate, design and implement DIITD 2011.

goBEYOND Campus Climate Network



goBEYOND^{xvi} is a post-secondary partnering organization that is composed of individuals and partnerships from over 20 colleges and universities in British Columbia. The organization develops various initiatives that encourage climate-oriented education, research and action plans that help to move schools beyond climate-neutral.

goBEYOND was responsible for conducting the 2010 DIITD competition, and their knowledge and experience was invaluable to us as we set out to redesign the competition to integrate social media and individual-level activities into the existing brand. goBEYOND and our team co-managed communications, training, outreach and orientations throughout the competition.



Media and Graphics Interdisciplinary Centre (MAGIC)

MAGIC^{xvii} conduct innovative research in media technologies and act as incubators for ideas in computer-human interaction. We partnered with a team at MAGIC to custom tailor their MEE app. The redesign of this application was focused on using MEE as a hub for the four personal challenges we wanted to introduce into the DIITD programming. We partnered with MAGIC throughout the design, implementation, and research phases of the project, collecting data from the user profiles, and providing feedback for the graphic interface of the application itself. The guidance, support and insights from the MAGIC team were absolutely critical to our ability to integrate MEE into our programming.



Lucid Design Group

Lucid^{xviii} is a cleantech company that pioneered the development of real-time information feedback software that can be used to visualize data from water and energy sources. The company works towards making the user interfaces accessible, logical and educational in order to inspire behaviour change around the use of metered resources.

Our team partnered with Lucid to adjust their existing interface to accommodate the various scales of energy reading, at the house, residence and campus level. Providing these levels of granularity to the online feedback system allowed our research team to provide each competitor with a profile of energy use, an invaluable tool to inspire an action-reaction understanding.

3.0 Findings from the DIITD 2011 research

In this section, I ask some questions surrounding social media as a technology, as a tool, and as a mode. The findings in this section come from the analysis of our data from the DIITD competition. To contextualize these findings, I begin this section with a description of some of the key components of the competition that my research focuses on: The four challenges in the MEE app (Do it Daily, Do it Together, Do it With Your Politician, and Do it on Camera) and the role of community organizers who acted as information intermediaries between our management and the volunteers who implemented the competition on the ground.



3.0.1 My Everyday Earth challenges

The four MEE challenges were accessed and tracked through the MEE app. The design of each of these competition types focused on providing participants with multiple pathways to engage in the competition activities. Here I outline the purpose and design of each challenge.








Do It Daily (DID)

DID was a list of 11 challenges that participants could do everyday to save energy, and self-report them into the MEE system to obtain points. Each of the 11 actions were marketed through repetitive site visits to MEE, and the app tracked the self-reported points of each person (as shown in the MEE screenshot below), allowing participants to compare

11 Everyday Actions



themselves, and their residence, to others. The challenge also relied on social marketing prompts like posters, flyers, and public announcements at events to remind participants to do the actions, and also provided points for reporting the actions taken everyday. This was another strategy to get participants to think about energy saving actions on a daily basis. Actions included: showering in 4 minutes or less, turning off light switches, hanging clothes to dry, and sharing a fridge with a friend.

 My shower was 4 minutes or less	Why do this?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES	1 point
 I used colder water in the shower	Why do this?	<input type="checkbox"/> NO	0 points
 I washed all my clothes in cold water	Why do this?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES	1 point
 I went to a group study area	Why do this?	<input type="checkbox"/> NO	0 points
 I unplugged my fridge and shared my friend's	Why do this?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES	1 point



Do It Together (DIT)





DIT were in-person social events that brought participants together to socialize as a method to foster dialogue about energy, climate and sustainability issues. The events also worked as a way to do mass public announcements about the competition itself, and to nurture competition between individuals and residences. Each event had a theme that related to energy saving or dialogue about climate change issues, and volunteers also provided support and encouragement for doing the other challenges in the MEE app. DIT events were a way to encourage discussion and strengthen the online community through in-person interaction. Below left is a talent show event held at one campus DIT event, and below right is a volunteer tabling at an event to encourage participation.



Do It With Your Politician (DIWYP)

DIWYP was a challenge designed to encourage students to recognize the importance of practicing civic engagement. The challenge provided four options (shown in the MEE screenshot on the next page) for communicating directly with the participant's local MP, asking them about their position on climate change and the policies or actions that were currently being taken to reduce energy use and Greenhouse Gas Emissions. The four levels of communication (from easiest to hardest) were: sending an email, printing and sending a form letter that was already written, drafting a letter and sending it, and making a phone call directly to the MP. Participants received more points for more difficult levels, and could only do the challenge once. The levels of communication were as much about encouraging direct action as they were about providing multiple pathways to take that action.

Choose how you want to follow up with your representative:

- ☐  Send an email (5 - 25 points)
- ☐  Send a form letter by mail (10 - 50 points)
- ☐  Send my own letter by mail (15 - 75 points)
- ☒  Make a phone call (20 - 100 points)

Pledge Action



Do It On Camera (DIOC)

DIOC was a vlog challenge. A *vlog* is a video-blog: the act of recording yourself with a video camera, talking about a subject of interest, and posting it onto an online host site like Youtube and/or Facebook (as shown in the below screenshots taken from two UNBC vlogs). The idea behind vlogging is either to start new conversation about a topic, or to contribute to an existing conversation. Students were challenged five times during the competition to record themselves responding to questions that were designed to generate community discourse around a topic. Vlogging as a method of self-reflection can be a powerful tool to bring out, and develop, an understanding of community values around specific issues. Like the other challenges, providing the opportunity to communicate through video was a way to expand the pathways to take action.



3.0.2 Community Organizers

The term *community organizer* (CO) is intended to describe the individuals who acted in a specific role as intermediaries between our team and the volunteers and participants of DIITD 2011. Their role included: receiving and disseminating information from the competition managers, organizing and managing the implementation of DIITD programming, management of volunteers, and oversight of event organizing, tabling, cooperation with all levels of management and volunteer groups.

COs had varying job titles at their respective university campuses. Some were Residence Advisors living in residence with participants, some were sustainability coordinators or advocates from campus organizations that worked across residences, while others were external advocates that did not normally work with university campus residents.

3.1 Findings from DIITD 2011

This section asks questions about the role of social media in competition and community engagement. The findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews, focus groups and surveys that the project research team conducted with participants and COs in 2011 and 2012, following the DIITD 2011 competition.

3.1.1 How can social media be used to learn about a community?

Learning from the previous DIITD competition in 2010, we were aware that in-person events yielded some interesting conversations about energy and climate change issues. For the 2011 competition, we wanted to expand the opportunity to have discourse through social media. We used the DIOC challenge to ask participants to reflect on energy conservation and climate change issues in order to learn about the effectiveness of these digital modes in encouraging discourse.

Findings

We found that vlogging was an effective mode for getting responses to our questions. Not everyone was interested in vlogging, but our findings suggest that UNBC quickly grew a culture around the activity. The vlogs were varied in their information, ranging from short dramas that antagonized people with over-consuming behaviours, to personal reflections about climate change and energy saving. In total, we received over 80 vlogs from the UNBC community (many vlogged more than once), an impressive amount considering that there were 83 MEE participants at UNBC.

We learned that vlogging provided participants with a way to engage in a discussion about climate and energy issues that was personal, sometimes reflective, and usually fun. Most of the videos were based around a story, and participants in one focus group noted that vlogging provided them opportunities to share their thoughts through music, through acting, through reflection and through humour. Many of the respondents from the post-competition survey who found the DIOC challenge meaningful, mentioned that the mode provided them with a tool to 'have a voice' about an issue. Other sentiments focused on the use of vlogging to not only express an opinion, but to continue to spread the word about DIITD to their campus. In effect, the participants used vlogging to teach us about their knowledge, opinions and perspectives *while* using their videos to support the competition's objectives.

The use of vlogging on campuses also partly depended on how well the discussions were supported by our research team, and other participants at the university. During our focus group research, we learned that many vloggers from UNBC felt that their message had been received by other participants; comments on Youtube, Facebook or even in the halls of residence contributed to their desire to continue to vlog. At UBC, where vlogging was not as popular, participants reported that there was far less information about, and support for creating vlogs. As a result, those who vlogged at UBC received fewer comments through Facebook and Youtube. In fact, increased vlogging production and views only came later as a way to gain points⁵ rather than comment on the content. These differences in community uptake of vlogging show that support from our research team and the other vloggers appeared to have a significant impact on use of that mode.

In conducting a competition that was about taking action on energy saving - something people enjoy - while providing a pathway (vlogging) to talk about the issues of climate change - something that's a little more complex - we were able to learn about the communities knowledge, perspectives and opinions on climate change *while* providing pathways for them to mobilize. Vlogging represents a mode that helps to better inform engagement specialists about how to approach specific topics in each community. Providing the public with an opportunity to engage in discussion about issues that contextualize an objective will provide more information about the community. In effect, these findings suggest that specialists can benefit by *engaging with the community in order to learn how to engage with the community*.

⁵ Competitors attained points by competing in each MEE challenge. For the DIOC (vlog) challenge, vloggers could attain two levels of points. By submitting a vlog that answered the challenge question and meeting the time limit requirements, the vlogger attained the lower level of points. By submitting a vlog that also showed the presence of editing, layering of shots, and more organized production, vloggers attained a higher level of points. Additionally, points were given to competitors who acted as subjects or interviewees in the vlog, even if they did not record or submit the vlog themselves.

3.1.2 How can social media help to enhance a competition environment that builds community?

Since DIITD is a competition, we had a unique opportunity to understand how the dynamics of a competition environment facilitate or impede the development and engagement of online communities around specific issues. In particular, the design of MEE was an important place to focus this research since it was the access point providing pathways to engage in the community while developing networks with other MEE users.

Findings

Our post-competition survey provided results that support the value of creating a community through a social media application. Sixty seven percent of respondents who reported using MEE, also reported logging in once a day or more. When asked what they did as soon as they logged in, 40% said they logged their points for the actions they had accomplished that day, and 33% said the first thing they did was check out what other participants in the community were doing to save energy. So 73% of all MEE participants were logging in to update the community about their actions, or to find out what actions other people were taking in the community.

One focus group participant noted the importance of MEE as a tool for this, saying, "I think the thing I remember the most [about the competition] was the Facebook app, My Everyday Earth, because with that I could track the progress of UBC versus other universities, or my dorm against the other dorm..." A participant in a separate focus group said, "I think [social media] worked fairly well, particularly MEE and being able to see how we're doing compared to other universities and live tracking." These and other similar comments suggest that designing for dynamic performance-updates and connectivity between participants is a powerful tool that social media offers.

We also found that creating competition around a public issue attracts participants. Eighty percent of our respondents from the post-competition survey indicated that the ability to earn points and log into a point system encouraged them to participate using MEE. After only three weeks of using MEE, a total of 78% answered "maybe" (39%) or "yes" (39%) when asked if they would continue to use MEE to track the performance of themselves and others, after the competition was over.

When asked again seven months later in our long-term impact survey if the ability to track participation and compete using MEE was important in getting individuals to participate, 33% said it was important, and 25% said it was very important, while 25% remained neutral and 10% said it was not important at all. So a total of 58% were influenced in some way to participate by the availability of MEE. A positive result for a pilot project.

According to results from the long-term impact survey, the majority of respondents indicated that their participation was influenced by activities that were ‘competitive’ (72%) and ‘fun’ (75%). Additionally, the survey shows that all four challenges were important to some participants: DID (72%), DIT (66%), DIOC (26%), DIWYP (17%).

What is encouraging about all of these results is not that respondents preferred the DID challenge over the others, but that each pathway was important in encouraging some individuals to participate. In other words, the survey results tell us that all the challenges were important to different people. This finding is very important for understanding that creating multiple pathways to engaging with energy saving and climate change issues is likely to attract more users than would a single pathway, and that competitors are in fact attracted to competing through a networked social media application.

Along with making the challenges fun, participants also felt that they provided a sense of meaning about some broader issues. Here are some comments from research participants sharing why they valued these pathways:

About DID: "Completing simple, everyday tasks made the competition more meaningful and easy to participate, as well as formed habits I can continue with in the future."

About DID: "Little things add up in the end and even though we didn't come first [place] overall, I feel I made a difference to a greater cause."

About DIT: "I think bringing people together to participate in energy friendly events is a great way to promote the eco-friendly lifestyle and still have fun."

About DIOC: "I felt that this was the most meaningful and entertaining way to get the word out there about DIITD. Having the ability to see the vlogs as they are being posted to Facebook motivated other vloggers to join."

About DIWYP: "[I could] reach out to the real world and people who could make a difference."

These results suggest that social media is effective at attracting users to participate in a competition or activity because it can act as a centralized hub to provide access to multiple pathways for engagement that are dynamic and fun, while simultaneously acting as a hub for communications between participants in the competition. It is this hub that makes social media unique in its ability to centralize a place for action and a place for building networks while being remotely accessible.

3.1.3 Who should support social media in the community and what are some key characteristics of this role?

Social media has the capacity to act as a hub for communications as well as a place to provide pathways to engagement. Part of the research was based on finding out if social media should be supported offline in some way to encourage use. Since there is often a similar role in off-campus communities, we focused our research on the COs in the communities in order to understand if they were integral to supporting the use of social media modes and influencing the level of participation in the competition. If this was the case, it would be important to identify the characteristics of their role that were critical to success.

Findings

During my coordination of the competition, I kept in regular contact with the COs in order to stay updated about the community and to provide information. I observed that in addition to using email and Facebook, COs spent a majority of their time on the ground in residences facilitating events, doing tabling, and using their networks to make sure that the DIITD messaging was reaching new people. I also observed that some COs struggled in their role, while others felt very comfortable. Their seemed to be a relationship between universities that performed better, with COs who seemed more comfortable, and vice versa. In my research I sought to understand how these two things were related. One respondent, who characterized her experience as a struggle, described her role as an "external main organizer" that "wasn't associated with residence in any way before Do It In The Dark." She did not have any knowledge of the existing network of organizations and Residence Advisors, and had never lived in residence at the university she was managing. When asked how this effected her ability to do her job, she stated that, "because I was an external person I was only around during the events so I didn't get a sense of what was happening in-between events or people's daily experience with the challenge." In addition, there was no feedback from the Residence Advisors about how the competition was proceeding, "...it was like [the Residence Advisors and volunteers] didn't want to hear my ideas because of the fact that I was external." In effect, the way this COs role was defined actually impeded her ability to develop a network.

By contrast, respondents from other universities had all, at one time, been members of the residence community on their campus. One CO, who felt very prepared to act in her role, described it as being much more connected to the network of people that were involved in DIITD, "Last year we were

involved in planning DIITD in both [campus residences], so this year when I was doing training with you guys we had our challenges meeting with the [Residence Advisors] and [residence coordinators] and so we just all worked as one big team to help DIITD work." The same respondent also had a clear understanding of how to utilize her strong and weak ties^{6xix}. Her role did not allow enough time to engage everyone, and so her approach was to continue to develop strong ties to the Residence Advisors, and let them engage the competitors. To paraphrase, the respondent noted that the RAs are the people who have the meaningful and trusting relationships with competitors; they live together, they're friends, they know people by name and call their names out in the hallway. So she recognized the network asset that the Residence Advisors already possessed, and used it effectively to engage with them.

Another respondent from the same university described the value of her strong ties as vital to her role, "Well I have strong ties with [residence]. I was a Residence Advisor in [residence] last year... and I was also on the sustainability committee so I planned DIITD last year, so I had strong ties with the administration... Just by virtue of my best friend living there, I knew a lot of them already. So I had pretty strong relationships there... I was really familiar with the requirements of the Residence Advisors and their lifestyles and their commitments, and what could be expected of them... that was really helpful." She continued to say, "Then of course because I was a Residence Advisor, I had extra contact through the Green Residence Advisors personally because I work with them on a regular basis."

So it was not only networks, but trust that seemed vital to being an effective CO. When asked about the perception of her own role, the struggling CO said, "I was never going to be one of them. I wasn't one of the [Residence Advisors]. They didn't know me. None of the leaders knew me." In other words, the perception of external management created a barrier to building trust. She further supported trust as a key attribute for COs in this statement, "I don't think it's [just] about knowledge, I think it's about relationships. It's really important that the person who is [a CO] is part of that community." This particular CO reported having developed some trust by the end of the

⁶ The concept of *strong and weak ties* actually comes from the *Strength of Weak Ties* Theory developed by Mark Granovetter in 1973. It can be explained, more simply, as the depth of the relationships in a network. In our case, strong ties tend to be close friends, colleagues, family and partners. Weak ties tend to describe acquaintances, friends of friends, distant colleagues, and the staff of partnering organizations. The development and maintenance of strong and weak ties is vital to network-building and the efficient movement of information through digital and analog communication modes.

competition, but by then it was too late to utilize it. So understanding the community and already having trusting ties with individuals who, in turn, had their own networks in the community, was a key component to disseminating information effectively.

In addition to having trust and well-developed community networks, COs acted as the links between our management team and the team Residence Advisors that supported online and offline activities. The COs were a vital node in the flow of information, receiving information from our team and delivering it to the individuals in their networks. One CO characterized this process in an interview, "I felt more like a liaison at times... I would come to the training sessions with you where we would learn about the competition as a whole and we would bring it to our team that we were working with at [residence]... and then we would talk as a collective group about what kind of activities, what kind of events we could do to be able to make this competition work for the residence there."

Another CO added that, "Really my role was to support the two planning committees in [the residences] from an organizational [side]... and serving as a liaison between [committees], so educating the committees about the competition and what we are trying to achieve on a greater campus-wide scale... and... being a filter for communications with you, [my manager], goBEYOND, and distilling information down to what the on-the-ground organizers need[ed] to know." These findings suggest that the COs role in interpreting and selectively disseminating information is based on their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the individuals in their network. Because our team was unable to develop our own networks within the time permitted, we relied on the COs ability to deliver the information effectively, and we relied on the networks that they had already built in the community to be well developed.

These findings suggest that there was a direct link between the developmental stage of the COs network and their ability to successfully accomplish their role. They also suggest that trust between the CO and their network of organizers was an important characteristic to disseminating information effectively. In fact, the relationship between the robustness of COs networks (as reported in the interviews) and the success of their campus in the competition was very strong, supporting our findings.

3.1.4 Should social media be used on its own, or integrated into a communications strategy?

Our findings on using social media as a way to enhance competition and make engagement fun, note that providing multiple pathways to engagement helps to accommodate individual preferences for participation. Using this insight to think about social media as one mode in a set of online and offline tools raises the question about whether social media should be used as part of an engagement strategy, or as a stand-alone mode. Understanding more about user experience in and outside of MEE helps to inform this line of inquiry.

Findings

Since high levels of participation in offline activities were logged through the MEE app, we know that social media helped to facilitate action that was taken outside of a social media environment. For example, the DID actions and the DIT events were methods of mobilizing without digital devices, while having been facilitated by digital devices. The data from MEE tells us that participants want to mobilize around real-world actions and that social media works well as a facilitator for taking action offline.

Also of note is that while 66% found MEE an important part of their participation in DIITD, 69% found Facebook an important part. Even this small difference in proportions suggests that there was a population of participants in the competition that used Facebook as a hub for communications about the competition, without participating in the online challenges through MEE. Through our observations and focus group research, we were able to substantiate this assumption. Focus group participants who reported using Facebook to stay connected to DIT events (which were promoted on Facebook as well as MEE) reported not having used MEE to participate in the competition. So while some were using social media to communicate and to participate, others were simply using it to stay more informed about the competition than they would if they simply relied on offline modes.

Our research also suggests that the use of social media was supported by COs and Residence Advisors engaging participants in-person to get online and use the social media tools like MEE. One CO mentioned that, "It sort of had to be a word of mouth thing that you found out through someone else in-person, and then they could show you My Everyday Earth and show you the Facebook group..." and another CO suggested, "[outside of MEE] we also had an inter-house competition that was going on between all different houses in [residence] and so we gave people

points for coming to events and for doing things on the My Everyday Earth app."

This level of encouragement also carried over into encouraging users to vlog. One CO created her own vlogs in an attempt to get others interested. She noted that, "I am Facebook friends with several [people] on my floor and several people within the residence community so that on an individual basis and on a Residence Advisor basis... people walked up to me and they're like, hey I saw your... video! What's that all about? and it got them curious." The university she worked at logged more high-quality vlogs than any other campus. It also turned out that the same CO was president of the campus sorority, and so her network of strong and weak ties was also a valuable asset to her role in getting her community to become engaged with vlogging.

This research suggests that COs need to connect with their community online and offline in order to facilitate a functioning communications network since there is not one preference for communication. Some are linked to the community offline, some are linked online, and most are linked through both. COs have access to these links in the community, and they have the ability to utilize them more effectively than any engagement specialist.

3.2 Insights from recent events and planning literature

This section asks questions about the perception and use of social media by the public and engagement specialists. The discussion in this section is informed by recent global events and literature on the use of social media in planning engagement, and is complemented by some findings from the DIITD 2011 data.

3.2.1 What do the public's experiences with social media tell us about its relevance in public engagement?

It would not be a stretch to assume that some public engagement specialists discount social media tools as methods of facilitating citizen involvement for fear that they will lead to some disconnected and apathetic virtual society. To be fair, perhaps a more practical (and less dystopic) assumption is that using them will lead to fragmented public engagement processes. To begin to understand why we have developed our current understanding of social media, we need to first decide whether we are skeptical about social media's potential because we have tested it thoroughly and assessed its true value for engagement with communities, or because it is something that we don't fully understand. Three events in history will help to answer the questions posed: the Minitel, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movement.

Insights

In his first volume of the Information Age Trilogy, social theorist Manuel Castells reminds us of the French Minitel, the world's first computer-mediated mass communication system introduced in France in 1984^{xx}. Minitel was a method of networking businesses, individuals and communities with only the slightest nuances in technological advances beyond the phonebook. By today's standards, it was a dinosaur, and not only that, the improvements in communication between people were only marginally improved. And yet millions^{xxi} of French citizens adopted and used the technology^{xxii} until its very recent retirement in June, 2012^{xxiii}.

So what was so appealing about Minitel? It wasn't the elegant design of the interface, or the ability to fit it in a shirt pocket - which, by the way, you couldn't. The reason for its rapid popularity was that it provided people with an opportunity to express themselves using a new mode of communication, to a new and larger audience^{xxiv}. In other words, Minitel was one of the first social media technologies. As Castells writes,

"...the French Minitel... originated in the 1980's in an intense urban environment, whose vitality and face-to-face interaction was hardly undermined by the new medium. Indeed, French students used Minitel to successfully stage street demonstrations against the government"^{xxv} (pg. 377)

Now, the point here is not to insinuate that social media is only valued as a tool for organizing political protests, but to say that even in the fledgling stages of social media tool development, citizens grasped the opportunity to utilize and develop them into alternative modes for self-expression and civic engagement.

Flash forward to the present. A great deal of debate has surrounded the notion that Facebook and other social media sites were a primary tool to voice opinion and organize civil resistance movements during the Arab Spring, beginning in Tunisia on December 18th, 2010^{xxvi}. What we do know, however, is that as the movements spread across the Arab world, including Tahrir Square in Egypt, so did the use of social media. There are about 45 million people in Arab countries that are connected to Facebook, and this number has tripled in the last three years^{xxvii}. Perhaps the connection between these two events in time is merely a coincidence, and perhaps it is also a coincidence that of the 250 million tweets occurring all over the world every day in 2011, the most popular hashtag⁷ of the year was "#egypt"^{xxviii}. The Arab Spring has taught us that social media is part of a set of tools that citizens want to use, either to organize and communicate, to assert their rights, or both. So whether or not social media was the enabler of civic action is irrelevant because the events that occurred suggest that it is perceived by the public as a way to enhance their voice, and the more connected their voices become, the more effective they become at taking an active role in civic engagement.

⁷ Twitter users can place a “#” before their update which will then act as a link to a search of tweets using that update. This feature is meant to facilitate a global discussion on a topic. These are called hashtags.



L: Occupy organizers, idealab.talkingpointsmemo.com; C: Minitel, journaldugeek.com; R: Protester, blogs.channel4.com

Less than a year later, and across the world, the Occupy movement started to take root. First popularized by the occupation of Zircotti Park in New York City on September 17, 2011, Occupy was a movement instigated⁸ by Vancouver-based company Adbusters^{xxix}. Inspired by the Arab Spring and by citizen distrust of financial sectors - symbolized by places like Wall Street - hundreds of thousands of citizens created spaces of insurgency in their own cities and towns to make their voices public. Unlike the ambiguity of the role of social media in the Arab Spring, its use for organizing events during Occupy is undeniable^{xxx}. Coordinators used social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Meetup and Skype to create communications networks that spanned the globe^{xxxi}. These networks were used to share facts and information, have opinions, stage protests, set up meetings, organize single events in a city or coordinate events that would happen in multiple cities simultaneously. Since social media can provide a one-to-many interface without needing contact information, while providing a virtual hub as the meeting place, anyone wired-in can access the information and attend the event. In this way, and because traditional broadcast media covered only what it chose to (and in this case, surprisingly little), social media became the tool of the people; a way to share information and become actively involved in a public issue they believed in. In effect, social media helped citizens to engage meaningfully in a political process.

Over the past 30 years - from the Minitel, to the Arab Spring, to the Occupy movement - the tools have evolved, but at least one purpose for them hasn't changed; they provide a mode that can help an individual to learn, or simply access, their own public voice. Making informed decisions about social media can be achieved by increasing the available information about its nature in a way that is relevant to public engagement specialists. One way is to look at the experiences we've had, and another is to develop ways to implement and evaluate our use of these tools. Once we have reached this point, we might be able to make informed decisions about the risks and values of social media.

⁸ There is some debate about whether Adbusters started the Occupy Wall Street movement, or simply coined the name and called people to mobilize on Wall Street, which happened on their own account.

3.2.2 What is the perception of social media in civic engagement, and how does this affect the public?

The perception of social media ranges widely between individuals and professions. Since many of these perceptions are based on experiences with using social media, it is important to understand whether or not those experiences are objective in their approach to using the tools. It is also important to understand how the public perceives the role of social media in civic engagement processes.

Insights

In their analysis of a neighbourhood in Vancouver, BC where a major zoning change would allow significant redevelopment, Senbel and Church^{xxxii} looked at the digital communications tools that were used by the municipality to engage with the community. Two of those tools were emails and blogs that allowed commenting on the project. The authors found that although the tools seemed like a legitimate part of the engagement process, they were eventually discounted from the documented public opinion on the project^{xxxiii}. The authors suggest that planners discounted the social media comments because including them would have shown a lower level of public support for the project^{xxxiv}. It is likely that this kind of experience contributes to planners' distrust of social media, but it is just as likely that leading the public down a dead-end path will contribute to public disinterest in engaging with a process at all.

In 2010, Jennifer Evans-Cowley^{xxxv} conducted the most relevant research to date on the use of social networking tools by community leaders and engagement specialists to organize the public around planning issues. The author's study identifies and reviews social networking groups, group administrators, and planning departments in local municipalities^{xxxvi}. One important finding is that the majority of interest-based social network groups are formed to oppose, rather than support, some proposed change of public space. Drawing a connection between this and Senbel and Church's finding that planners tend to discount modes that increase a negative public perspective, it appears that social media can suffer from the same condition as any other public engagement mode - it can become dominated by individuals that are critical, unconvinced, or simply uninformed.

Public engagement specialists are also concerned about anonymous users creating fake user-names and falsifying a public process in which they are not entitled to participate. However, Evans-

Cowley finds in her study that the great majority of people use their real identities in social networks (since they also use these networks to actually *network*) and so anonymity is a 'minor concern'^{xxxvii}. To reduce this concern further, various social applications have been developed that would allow planners to develop and check user-profiles that would be just as detailed as anything documented at a conventional public hearing.

One finding from this study highlights how some efforts to use social media fail to realize one of its true values in public discourse. The author reports that her study shows social media tools are not very effective at attracting individuals to public meetings about an issue. Where she falls short, is in failing to test or comment on what might have happened if those individuals had been allowed to participate in a public process *through* the social media mode they were connected with. The author quotes one respondent's experience that, "On the phone many people were excited that they had joined the [social media] group, but were hesitant about making a further commitment to attend the meeting"^{xxxviii}. Does this mean people using social media are disinterested and lazy, or does it mean that they are being asked to participate through a mode they do not prefer to use? Experiences from the Arab Spring and Occupy movement show us that social media does have the potential to support in-person engagement, while much of my research shows that if it is properly designed and supported it can be effective at facilitating digital engagement as well.

Inferring from the two cases presented here, it appears that planners have interpreted the term 'public voice' quite literally, in that most often the method required for speaking out, is to actually speak. However, not everyone in a community is comfortable with, able to, or interested in traveling to a public hearing. What if 'public voice' was redefined as 'public comment'? Could we then assume that the use of social media constitutes a legitimate public opinion? Findings from Senbel and Church^{xxxix} and Evans-Cowley^{xl} seem to suggest that the public are interested in using social media as a legitimate mode. As it turns out, so were some of our survey respondents. We documented participants' reflections that social media had given them a sense of meaning and a voice. On the following page are some examples from participants who used social media to communicate their voice in the DIID competition:

"I feel that the politicians aren't that connected with the youth of today and they need to hear what we have to say."

"[I] felt like [I] was doing something meaningful by getting informed and holding our politicians accountable."

"[The vlogs] gave me a voice in the competition and they were fun to make!"

"[In the DIWYP challenge] I had to actually act on my thoughts."

"I've never contacted a politician about anything... and I went to go check it out and see how it was done and I read through the letter... and I agreed with what [it was] saying, and it's easier than you would expect it to be."

Many planners may want to dismiss social media as a mode for legitimate public opinion based on the perception that it increases opposition in civic engagement. However, it is clear that this is partly the result of poorly developed social media engagement practices, and a reluctance to work through a transitional period of uptake. If planners ask the public to put their time and energy into contributing to a civic process through a mode, and then alienate the legitimacy of that mode when its voices do not suit them, they are not only damaging relationships with entire networks of 'pro' and 'con' individuals in the community, and distancing themselves from a communications mode that the community values, they are concretizing a misperception of social media in their own profession. The findings from my research, as well as findings from Senbel^{xli} and Church and Evans-Cowley^{xlii} highlight the public's desire to use social media to learn and possibly contribute to an issue. This desire should inform what modes are considered legitimate for expressing opinion in civic processes.

4.0 Recommendations for public engagement specialists

This section of the report provides recommendations about the use of social media in communications, competition, and public engagement design for public engagement specialists. The recommendations each provide an explanation of *why* they are important, based on the findings in sections 3.1 and 3.2, and a description of *how* to incorporate them into current toolkits, which is based on my experience as a manager, coordinator and facilitator in the competition.

A note about using social media with the public

If you decide to include the use of social media modes when engaging the public, regardless of the mode, it is absolutely vital to provide a digital environment that is safe for whatever public you are engaging, especially when youth and children are involved. Moderation will be key to ensuring a safe and inclusive conversation that does not marginalize any individuals. Moderation might mean that you build trust with some interested citizens, and lose trust with others who feel they are being censored; Consult the community to develop rules of use that they are comfortable with. Finding a balance between being the *expert* and the *participant* in digital discussions will be based on the community dynamics, and your judgment.

4.0.1 Social media works effectively when integrated into a communications strategy for engagement

WHY

By using social media alongside existing strategies, the modes of communication available to engage are expanded, better accommodating the participant's preference for receiving and sending information. This increases the likelihood that they will participate. Social media modes also provide the ability to support those who want to use it to stay informed and participate online, as well as those who want to use to stay informed, but participate offline (or not at all). Considering social media as a component in a fuller communications strategy builds the capacity of the engagement process by providing online and offline modes that work to support each other, and to match individual preferences for engaging in a process.

HOW

When designing your engagement strategy with individuals, groups or the public, consider how social media will allow the community to become more networked, and how you will be able to access that network. Use social media as a way to provide a hub that shares events and information about your process, as well as ways to participate. Asking the community how they want to integrate social media into the process is the first step in designing an effective strategy. At first, you may want to use social media as a smaller component of your strategy, and build its capacity as you learn to better utilize the tools to learn about the community. However, regardless of the scale of your use of social media, for it to be effective, the mode itself must be supported and mediated by your agency and the public who have decided to use it. If left unsupported, the public may actually choose not to use the mode in the future because of a lack of feedback.

4.0.2 Integrating social media into your engagement process will improve your ability to understand the community's many knowledge, opinions, and perspectives on an issue, helping to inform further engagement with that community

WHY

By attracting and connecting individuals to a mode that matches their preferences, social media has great potential to facilitate a broader and more inclusive community around your public issue. Better representation will help inform you about the community and increase your ability to absorb and adapt to this new information. By using social media, both you and the community will be better informed about each other's knowledge and interests. Think of this strategy as an adaptive learning process, or *engaging with the community in order to learn how to engage with the community*.

HOW

Once you have integrated social media into your engagement strategy, using it to learn about the community will require that your design includes opportunities for public discussion that is facilitated or supported by your agency or yourself. Using social media to start discussions is no different than doing it in-person, the difference being that while an in-person conversation ends at the end of the public meeting, the social media conversation is 24/7. At first, using tools that the community is already using will facilitate participation, but you may want to experiment with media modes (such as vlogging) as you build interest and trust. Providing feedback and facts are important, but if you want to learn, allow the community the space to teach you. Consider carefully when to act like an expert, and when to learn from community expertise.

4.0.3 Providing social media applications where participants in a competition can get connected while having multiple ways to engage in fun activity are effective tools for mobilization

WHY

People have preferences about how they want to act on an issue. In competitions that are about energy conservation and climate change issues, participation can be enhanced by providing participants with multiple pathways to mobilize. Increasing the diversity of activities increases the chance that individuals will find it fun and meaningful to participate. Using social media to provide these pathways integrates the objectives of networking participants, providing ways to mobilize as individuals and as groups, and improving access to those with social media profiles and mobile technology.

HOW

In cases where your engagement process can be enhanced through creating activities that require participants to compete, develop the capacity to integrate a social media platform that provides real-time feedback into your design. The platform should allow participants in the community or competition to build networks with each other and with your agency or yourself if this is appropriate. It should also provide more than one mode of digital communication to broaden the availability to participate. Lastly, allowing participants to gain points in relation to themselves and each other helps to encourage communication through the network which will help participants to become familiar with each other in a fun and friendly way. This will require an application that can integrate into your social media platform (like MEE and Facebook), allowing participants to observe the real-time tracking and comment on each other's performance in the same place.

4.0.4 Identifying and building capacity for community organizers is vital to a strong communication link between your agency and the community, and catalyzing online and offline mobilization around your issue

WHY

Effective use of social media is partially dependant on who is supporting and promoting its uptake in the community. In engaging with communities it is critical to consider who the community organizers (or community liaisons) are, how they are connected to the community, and what developmental stage their network of strong and weak ties is in. The networks that have been built by these individuals can define how far an engagement strategy can reach into the community. It is also critical to consider the quality of the community organizer's network with potential volunteers or other leaders in the community who may take an active role in a process. High quality networks that exhibit good flow of information and trust to and from the community organizer are indicative of increased participation.

HOW

The key is to identify whether or not your engagement will need to involve community organizers in a process. If you need to effectively disseminate information to and from a community, or promote the uptake of a social media mode, your process will benefit from involving a community organizer as a facilitator. To identify who will act effectively in this role, you should look for the following elements: If and how long the community organizer has been in a leadership role in their community, if they are - or have been - a direct part of the community that they are organizing, if they have working relationships with other community leaders, and if they have the trust of other key individuals in their community. This is no easy task, but it will allow you to develop a link between your agency and the community in order to effectively disseminate and receive information. Once briefed, the community organizer will use their networks to increase uptake of your online and offline programming.

4.0.5 Social media should be accepted and supported as a legitimate mode for expression of public opinion

WHY

Social media represents a broad set of tools that humans now use to communicate, organize, share and speak out. They provide the ability to amplify citizen voices in a way that transcends political, geographic and cultural borders. As the use of social media increases, so does the public's desire to use it as a legitimate form of civic engagement. Engagement specialists that use social media improperly, or not at all in communities that do use it, are damaging the networks between their agency and the community, and are alienating individuals that want to contribute to a public issue. It is likely that with proper support, social media will attract individuals and groups that balance the opinions and knowledge of 'pro' and 'con' citizens and citizen groups.

HOW

As an engagement specialist, you are the key link between your agency and a community, especially if you work on municipal issues. This means that the community and your agency look to you to open up new opportunities to involve the public. Social media represents the most effective and distributed online communications tools available, tools that can be easily adapted to facilitate network building and communications between you and the public. Social media needs advocates in your position that are willing to design, promote and support it as a legitimate mode for the public to contribute to a process. You can minimize problems of anonymity by using social media applications, and you can maximize balanced public input by respecting and responding to the opinions and knowledge transmitted through social media modes. To make social media a legitimate mode for civic engagement, your agency and yourself will have to work to develop ways to evaluate your use of social media, and adapt to community feedback.

5.0 Final Words

Active citizen involvement is a critical element for sustaining communities. However, as public engagement specialists we must concede that by only using traditional engagement practices, we are often not reaching a representative fraction of all cultural, economic, and demographic groups in our communities. Social media can help with this. It is already changing the way our communities interact. We are missing opportunities to connect with the public by assuming that it is a juvenile and trivial fad that only certain demographics have popularized. In fact, all demographic groups are using social media, and, as we have seen from the Arab world since 2010, and from all over the world during the Occupy movement, the potential of social media is anything but trivial.

Our communities are speaking out with communications tools that are more powerful than anything we have yet seen, and they are using it together. We are rapidly moving away from a world where the public will accept that their only legitimate option to speak out about an issue is at a public meeting or hearing. It won't be long before citizens start demanding that engagement specialists and agencies recognize social media voices as legitimate ones. Integrating social media into our toolbox may not solve all of our problems, but it has the potential to provide some new and creative ways to help attract some of these citizens into a process to make their voice public. If social media can ignite a passion for active involvement in even a fraction of the citizens in our communities, then I believe it deserves a chance to be nurtured, studied, measured, and honed... by, and for, the public.

Endnotes

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