Digital Engagement, Social Media & Public Participation

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Introduction.

Internet technologies connect us each day with work, play, information, purchasing, and civic participation. Overwhelmingly, the majority of these online interactions are geared towards entertainment, consumerism, and non-political socializing (Dahlgreen, 2005). At the same time, 'civic technologies' are fostering new opportunities for people to participate in public decision-making and community life.

Digital tools are used for P2 because they offer the promise of increasing the convenience of participating, enabling better informed citizens, reaching diverse audiences over large geographies, sustaining engagement over time, in somewhat customized ways, with reduced costs, and can offer automated analysis which allows for faster decision-making.

Despite the growing use of online tools to engage the public, there is still much to learn. In many instances, number of participants is low, most participants engage infrequently, the connection between participation and policy-making is unclear, and technologies can be unreliable. There are also important concerns regarding degrees of inclusion, unequal power among participants and between participants and conveners, lack of online civic engagement skills, the influence of social media filters, and civility in online discussions.

The field of digital civic engagement is wide. This paper does not address important topics such as the digitization of government services, online voting, citizen organized online activism, or wider internet related issues such as online security, privacy, open internet standards, or net neutrality.

Below, you'll find practical information about using digital tools for public engagement. The paper begins with definitions, followed by two foundational concepts about convening digital P2, and developing objective-driven digital engagement. The digital divide is then considered, in order to think critically about who is, and isn't, participating online. A strategic framework for understanding digital P2 tools is shared, using the IAP2 spectrum. Managing risk is explored with a focus on comments and moderation approaches. Finally, the paper concludes with five recommendations for high impact digital P2.

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About
Digital Engagement.

Digital engagement is the "use of information and communications technologies to support, enhance, or extend public participation and civic engagement processes," (Bonneman, 2013). Digital tools used for P2 include social media, websites, online tools, videos and photos, SMS, and apps; they can be experienced through computers, smart phones, tablets and other devices.

Social media is a central tool for digital P2. Social media websites and applications enable users to create and share content, and to interact with other users with whom they share a connection. These tools make it easier for P2 participants to share their views with large groups of people, get information, give input into decision-making, find like-minded people to work with on change, and raise attention about important issues. Social media is a powerful tool for civic participation because conversations are often initiated from the bottom up (Kirkpatrick, 2011), enabling the public to help set the agenda and discuss issues that may not be a priority for government or corporations.

Internationally, the term e-participation is used to describe government's use of "internet communication technologies in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery in order to make it participatory, inclusive, and deliberative," (UNDESA, 2013). The three elements of e-participation measured by the U.N. are: the provision of information on the internet, online public consultations, and involving citizens directly in decision processes. A majority of governments in countries around the world, 123 of 193 U.N. countries, have some means - sometimes a simple feedback form - of collecting citizen opinions online (U.N., 2012). Canada ranks 8th in the U.N.'s 2016 global e-participation ranking, due to both the number of participating governments and range of tools used. Of note, only 20% of ranked countries "indicate that the e-consultation outcomes have resulted in new policy decisions, regulation or service," (U.N., 2016, p. 68), highlighting an important focus area for all digital P2 conveners.

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Two Cornerstones of Digital P2.

1: **Good quality engagement follows the same principles whether it's online or offline.** The IAP2 Core Values offer a comprehensive description of high quality engagement, and there are other valuable frameworks such as those from NCDD, Simon Fraser University, Tamarack, and more. In addition to these core aspects of careful planning, implementation and follow up, digital P2 requires extra effort to notify people of the opportunity to participate, how to participate, and testing the tools under real-use conditions.

2: **Digital engagement enhances the techniques you already use to engage communities, it's not a replacement.** Digital tools are an effective complement for reaching audiences that you wouldn't necessarily reach face-to-face such as remote audiences, younger participants, and busy working people. Online tools enable participants to learn and contribute in ways that are customized to their own interests and amount of time available, which can improve in-person engagement. Both in-person and online approaches have their strengths, and each should be leveraged. Of course, some contexts are not appropriate for digital tools, such as in high conflict situations or with communities that have poor internet access.

Objective-Driven Digital P2

Knowing what you want to achieve as a result of your P2 process is the foundation of creating any effective engagement strategy, including digital. It's all too common for an enthusiastic team member to promote a newly-discovered-digital-tool as a "must have" for a P2 project. First steps should focus on why you engage, who you engage, what you do, how you do it, and what you measure to know if you're achieving your desired impacts. Then, choose your tool.

Connect to Organizational Objectives
Connect your digital P2 objectives to the convening organization's or project's overall objectives. Since each digital P2 channel has different conventions, refine your objectives so they are appropriate for the channel and target user group.

Be Responsive to Target Participants
Define your digital P2 objectives in response to specific desired participants, the relationship you have with those communities, and what you've learned about the digital tools that they are likely to use.

Consider Your Capacity
Decide upfront how much time, resources, and effort you can invest in your digital engagement, then consider if your objectives are feasible.

Examples of (digital and in-person) P2 objectives include: Informing the public; exploring or explaining an issue; transforming a conflict; obtaining feedback; collecting data; identifying problems; building capacity; developing collaboration; reaching conclusions (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

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The Digital Divide
& its Impact on
Digital Engagement.

The digital divide is traditionally defined as the gap between people with effective access to digital and information technology, and those with poor access. The major variables to effective access are income and education (Statistics Canada, 2012). Mobile devices are changing the landscape, although there are certainly still communities unable to get adequate basic access, notably Canada's non-urban indigenous communities (Haight et al, 2014).

Today's most pressing aspect of the digital divide is a second level divide, known as the "production gap" or the "democratic divide". The production gap defines the difference between those that produce online information for public consumption, and those who do not. The democratic divide is the gap between people who participate in public life online, and those who do not, even though they have high internet access and skill (Min, 2010). Individuals who already exhibit high levels of personal and political efficacy, are more likely to use civic technologies (Rambul, 2015). Disproportionate use of digital participation by elite voices groups is likely to distort the government's perception of public needs and attitudes (Schradie, 2011).

Addressing the civic involvement gap requires the same strategy as designing any inclusive engagement processes: ensure diversity and inclusion in the design, development and testing of civic technologies (Rambul, 2015).

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Thinking Strategically about Digital Tools.

Tools available for digital P2 are constantly emerging, changing and disappearing. Therefore, rather than focusing on a few favorite tools currently available, it's useful to view digital civic engagement tools through a strategic lens. Here, we use the IAP2 P2 Spectrum. Other lenses for thinking strategically about digital engagement tools include considering tools by P2 objectives (see Leighninger, 2011), stakeholder map (see Kahootz, 2013), and by degree of peer interaction (see Bang the Table, 2016).

Digital Engagement and the IAP2 P2 Spectrum

One impactful way to think about choosing digital tools is to consider them through the lens of the IAP2 P2 Spectrum, as shown in the table below.

Table 1.

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Example Tools	Newsletter, email, video, website, social media, live stream meetings	Social media discussion, polls, blog, workbook, survey	Ideation, survey, polls, serious games, social media discussion	Online forums, document co-creation, mapping, Twitter chat, video meeting	Decision-making: Online voting, participatory budgeting Community action: Discussion forums

<div align="center">Listen Throughout</div>

Listening…

Digital engagement calls for "Listen" to be tacked on to all levels of the IAP2 P2 Spectrum. "Listening" is tuning into existing online (public) conversations through simple tools like a web search, or more complex tools like social media monitors.

The result of listening is a greater understanding of how people perceive your organization and the issues. Listening also uncovers active online communities and individuals, who can play an important role in a P2 project. Listening is also an early warning system if the project is not meeting the needs of participants.

Getting value from online listening depends on analyzing what you hear, and then applying this information to the design of your digital engagement strategy.

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Table 2. Categories & Examples of Digital Engagement Tools

Dialogue and Deliberation	Ideation	Mapping and Wikis	Engagement Suites
Discussion platforms to foster civic conversation	Elicit ideas and levels of support for the ideas	Collect and display geographic data	Mix of engagement tools from single provider
Loomio, Agora, Neighborland, CiviComment, Pol.is, Ethelo, PeakDemocracy	Consider.it, IdeaScale, OpenTownHall, SpigitEngage, Ideaforum, Citizenlab	LocalWiki, Wikiplanning, MapIt, Mapumental, OpenStreetMap, Neighborland	BangTheTable, 76Engage, ConsultationManager, Cap-collectif, Citizen Space, PlaceSpeak

Serious Games	Citizen Reporting	Citizens Panel	Hyper-Local Groups
Playful tools to engage on serious issues	Residents notify their (municipal) government of items in need of attention	Volunteer group shares demographics and ongoing survey responses	Neighbourhood or school-based forums for social and issue based conversations
Community PlanIt, City Creator, Super City, Crowdgauge, Busmeister, MetroQuest, Citizen Budget	SeeClickFix, FixMyStreet, PublicStuff	Vision Critical, Community Panel, various polling companies	E.democracy.org, various online forums, blogs, social media groups

Legislation Engagement	Citizen Science	Crowdfunding	Petitions
Transparency in the legislative process	Contribute data to a common collection	Distributed fundraising campaign for community projects	Collect signatures for or against something
WhatDoTheyKnow, TheyWorkForYou, Countable	Ushadi, Lake Observer, BCWF Conservation App, eBird, Journey North	Citizinvestor, Neighborly, Kickstarter, Wayblaze	Change.org, WeThePeople, Neighborland

Social Media	Advocacy Platforms	SMS Polling and Notifications	Event RSVPs
Users create and share content with others in their networks	Digital tool suites to facilitate political or community organizing	Poll via text message or send bulk text messages	Help groups assemble at offline events
Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest	New Mode, Sprout Social	PollEverywhere, Textizen, Sli.do, TextTalkAct	Eventbrite, Attending.io

Surveys	Volunteer Organizing	Live Streaming	Listening
Collect responses to questions	Self-organize individual volunteer efforts	Share live video of event	Monitor social media for relevant discussions
Canadian Servers: Simple Survey, Voxco, Jitsutech, Choicebook American Servers: Google Forms, Survey Monkey, TownHallApp	CivNet, SnowCrew, Volunteer Spot, Recovers.org	Periscope, Facebook Live, YouTube Live	Hootsuite, Keyhole, Sprout Social, Google Alerts

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Online Comments & Managing Risk.

Anyone who's read the comment sections of an online newspaper knows that people's contributions can be surprisingly vitriolic. Fear of a conversation getting out of hand is a common barrier to starting online digital engagement, even though quality engagement thrives on exchanging diverse perspectives.

To manage risk, first get clear on the types of risk you may face. Quiip (2016) describes three kinds of risk for online commenting: legal risks (e.g. discrimination, IP/copyright infringement), user risks (e.g. online bullying, offensive imagery or language), and reputation risks (e.g. criticism of services, or inappropriate comments).

Develop a moderation strategy policy to help determine what types of comments you should respond to, and in what way. Your moderation strategy may include:

- **User standards:** description of encouraged and disallowed behaviour in your digital engagement space.

- **Moderation guidelines:** Draw inspiration from the classic Australian flowchart from the Victorian Government's Department of Justice (2012) which helps determine whether to respond, let it stand, or share positively. Also consider your legal obligations regarding freedom of information and protection of private information.

- **Moderation schedule:** Persons responsible for reviewing the comments, and how often, which is particularly important in high conflict settings.

- **Moderation process:** When something gets flagged through the moderation guidelines, what are the steps to respond, who is involved, and what records are required.

Digital Engagement Tool Directories

Civic Tech Field Guide

bit.ly/organizecivictech

Public Voice: online engagement tools database

publicvoice.co.nz/online-engagement-tools

ParticipateDB: The Digital Engagement Tool Directory

participatedb.com

Open Plans: tools to use for public engagement projects

blog.openplans.org/2014/12/21299

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5 Recommendations for High Impact Digital P2.

1. **Engage specific online participants, not general audiences**

Identify specific communities and demographics you want to participate in each aspect of your P2 project. Then, build relationships with those communities by connecting with thought leaders and bloggers, following public conversations, contributing to these conversations, and interacting offline. Observe how this community interacts online. Be curious and ask what online channels the group is familiar with and prefers for interaction, then consider if those tools are right for your project.

Attracting participation is essential for P2 success. Online advertising is a powerful way to reach specific online audiences. For example, 23 million Canadians are on Facebook each month (Facebook, 2017), over 65% of the country's population. Track progress on diversity and numbers of participants, then use that information to adjust your notification strategies as you go.

2. **Decide upfront how much time and resources you can invest**

Wouldn't it be nice if a digital P2 project could be cheap, effective, and fast? After determining your objectives, consider the available financial and human resources, project timeline, existing and needed skills, hardware and firewalls, and of course, extent of support from organizational leadership.

Remember that some tools are "free" to access, but require significant amounts of staff time to configure, monitor, or use. If the person or team responsible is doing digital P2 off the side of their desk, avoid being active in multiple digital spaces that require a consistent staff presence.

3. **Prioritize interaction, particularly with social media**

Social media services automatically filter messages, to avoid users being overloaded by the large number of messages generated in their network (Bozdag, 2013). For example, the Facebook news feed prioritizes stories you'll like based on your profile and what you typically comment on, share, click, and spend time reading (Constine, 2016). Therefore, your content has to encourage engagement, or it won't be seen.

It's worth noting that posts by Facebook Pages are less frequently shown than posts by individual accounts. It's critical then that your users interact with your content, which then exposes your post to that user's network. Also, consider paying to boost your post.

There are two effective ways to increase your social media impact. First, monitor your metrics for the type of posts your audiences engages with, and keep doing those. When you have a post that does well, post it again in a few days. Also, spend a bit of money to promote these high performing posts to target audiences. Secondly, invest in good visuals. Ensure the image is understandable if a person shares it without your original post. Also include a call-to-action in the visual to encourage engagement with your content and project.
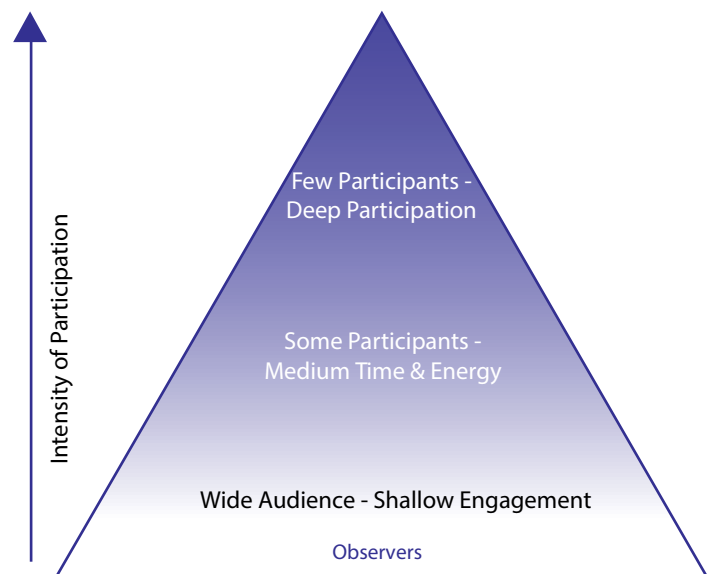
4. Measure what matters about your digital P2 impact

List size, open rates, follows and likes are common measures of online engagement. However, these "vanity metrics" do not indicate how well engagement objectives are being met. To measure what matters, get the sequencing right (Moblab, 2015a):

• Start with your project's engagement purpose

• Clarify what it will take to achieve that purpose

• Identify metrics for measuring progress

• Specify and track indicators that might predict future actions

• Regularly assess your metrics, and don't be afraid to change them

Remember that not meeting your targets is a learning experience. As a team, consider how you can use your data to strengthen your digital P2 in real time, and for your long-term practice.

5. Design engagement differently for different audiences

A successful digital P2 project will offer people opportunities to engage at different depths of commitment. Typically, the largest number of participants will have the lowest intensity of participation. The relationship is inverse as you go up a pyramid of engagement. For a good example of desired actions and sample metrics at each level of an engagement pyramid, see Moblab (2015b).

Intensity of Participation

Few Participants - Deep Participation

Some Participants - Medium Time & Energy

Wide Audience - Shallow Engagement

Observers

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A useful concept for thinking about designing digital P2…

is 'thin' and 'thick' participation. The New Zealand Government (2015) describes 'thin' methods as providing "an easy and fast way for participants to add ideas, vote or comment and include: inviting input via social media, crowd-sourcing, idea generation, using prioritisation tools." Whereas 'thick' methods "require more participant investment because they encourage participants to view, read and consider content before commenting or sharing their ideas."

Conclusion.

Digital P2 offers a powerful opportunity to reimagine public conversations in terms of who is involved and how they can participate. There is still much to be learned though about designing effective engagement. Because we are asking people for their time and careful consideration, digital P2 conveners must offer a high-quality experience that is easy to use, offers meaningful opportunities to contribute, and ensures results will be carefully considered by decision-makers. This paper offers a few approaches that may be of use. Perhaps of greatest importance to this effort is to have a learning orientation. The ever changing nature of the field requires both curiosity and data analysis to help define what works, and what can be done better next time.

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