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Civic Engagement and

Internet Use in Cache Valley

by

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ABSTRACT

Internet technology has provided tools for communication only dreamed of decades ago. This technology, coupled with civic engagement, has the power to influence local legislation in powerful ways. In this project, I conducted interviews and focus groups to find out how citizens of Cache County, Utah, are using the Internet to engage in civic affairs affecting local legislation. Interviewees were also asked what aspects of a community website would likely enhance their civic activity. It was found that people primarily use the Internet to access information and send email. Suggestions for enhancing engagement included more creative, and interactive ways of using the Internet. The project culminated in a rudimentary website implementing the information gleaned from interviews.

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INTRODUCTION

Ultimately, everything is local. Despite the barrage of coverage on national issues and elections, influence is often felt greatest on a local level. People's lives can be more influenced by zoning ordinances, for example, than federal legislation. And ideally, the voice of the people affects those ordinances.

Consider the area of 1000 North and 600 East in Logan, Utah. One day, residents in this quiet neighborhood awoke to the news of a proposed multi-level student-housing complex to be built on an empty lot surrounded by family homes. Citizens, ignited by concerns about traffic, noise, and blocked views, attended the city-planning meeting in droves--well-prepared with giant photos and legal documents. It may have been all for naught, however; zoning laws were in place and the developer had well-established ordinances on his side. The voice of the people can help shape those ordinances—especially *before* they are written.

This project is about civic engagement on a local level, specifically in Cache County, Utah. I wanted to know what people in this valley are doing to participate in local decision-making and what might be done to enhance those activities using the Internet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Soon after the end of his career as a public servant, Thomas Jefferson expressed deep concern regarding one element of the new American Constitution. It "had given all power to the citizens without giving them the

opportunity of *being* republicans and *acting* as citizens" (Bucy & Gregson, 2001, p. 357). Over 200 years later, that same concern reverberates throughout scholarly literature in communication, political science, and sociology. This concern was the impetus for my selected topic of study, civic engagement.

The idea of "civic" has resonated throughout the West for centuries. The word descends from Latin terms for city and citizenship—usually pertaining to community. It assumes not only a legal relationship but a moral orientation as well. Persons are "civic minded" when they care about their community as a whole and are willing to act on its behalf—often at some cost to themselves (Galson as quoted in Gehring, 2005).

Community, or the *public*, stands in contrast to the *private*. Ancient Romans even considered privacy as *being out of public office*. John Dewey noted "etymologically 'private' is defined in opposition to 'official,'…a private person being one deprived of public position" (Hannay, 2005, p. 71).

This goal of informing and motivating the public closely parallels work done by Yankelovich (1991). His landmark book, *Coming to Public Judgment*, addresses three stages of evolution from mass opinion to public judgment. First, "consciousness-raising" includes learning about issues but is more than just awareness. It includes feeling, concerns and readiness for action--perhaps driven by events like environmental degradation or threats from government. Second, "working through" is when an individual confronts the need for change. Here, the focus is on attitude. One is obliged to come down on one side of the issue or the other. Third, "resolution" includes the resolve to do something, make a change.

Often the ethical dimension comes into play and people struggle to do the right thing (pp. 63-65).

<div align="center">Definitions</div>

Scholarly literature provides a wide array of definitions for civic participation. (Although civic participation and civic engagement may have slight nuanced differences, scholarly research uses them interchangeably and I will do the same.) Some research measures civic participation as social participation and membership in formal groups (Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm & Dunsmore, 2005, p. 572). Wilkins (2000) was more specific, describing qualifying groups people may join to be considered civically engaged. Membership in a therapeutic support group or a tertiary association such as the National Organization for Women or the American Association of Retired Persons (where people often don't know each other or interact face to face) does not qualify as civic engagement (p. 570).

Putnam (1995) defined civic engagement in terms of *social capital.* Just as physical capital (tools) and human capital (training) increase individual productivity, social capital "refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 67). Civic participation can also be defined as "citizen involvement in making service delivery and management decisions" (Wang, 2001, p. 322). This includes but is not limited to participation in public hearings, citizen forums, community or neighborhood meetings, citizen advisory groups, citizen surveys, and focus groups. These activities could also include the Internet

and email (p. 322).

Wang (2001) also discussed two levels of civic participation. The "pseudo" level is when information travels in only one direction to inform citizens of decisions already made. Genuine engagement includes citizen participation in decision-making. Here, citizens are owners of government and co-producers of public goods (p. 323).

Schlozman, Verba and Brady (1995) explained, "Different modes of political participation serve as a vehicle for carrying different kinds of messages to public officials" (p. 29). With so much variety, they divide participation into three categories of electoral activity: contacting public officials, protesting, and community activity.

Civic participation, as the focus of my current study, will be conceptually defined as *behavior that communicates desire or intention to affect decision-making managing public goods and services for the benefit of the community.* In my project, civic participation is operationally defined as *involvement by Cache Valley citizens in local decision-making processes including but not limited to A) attending public hearings such as city council meetings, citizen forums, community neighborhood meetings, and citizen advisory groups; B) participating in citizen surveys and focus groups; C) contacting government leaders by phone, letter, or email with the intent of expressing opinion on local governance; D) writing letters to the editor or joining a protest, rally, or vigil highlighting issues affecting the citizens of Cache Valley; and E) using the Internet to participate in these activities.*

Relevance of Civic Engagement

The very norms and networks of civic engagement are determinants for the quality of life in this country and the performance of its social institutions (Putnam, 1995, p. 66). Social ills such as urban poverty, unemployment, crime, drug abuse, and health problems are more successfully resolved in civically engaged communities (p. 66). Even job placement and other economic successes have been positively correlated with strong social networks of civic engagement. Civic participation also increases the efficacy of representative government--as shown from the results of a 20-year, quasi-experimental study of sub-national governments in various regions of Italy (p. 66). And lastly, "Dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants' sense of self, developing the 'I' into the 'we,' or enhancing the participants' 'taste' for collective benefits" (p. 67).

In a study by Tolbert, Lyson, and Irwin (1998), researchers looked at data on more than 3,000 U.S. counties. Specifically, they examined data reflecting the activity level of small businesses, family farms, and civically engaged religious groups. There was a positive association between civic engagement and socioeconomic wellbeing. Higher levels of civic engagement correlated with lower levels of income inequality, poverty, and unemployment.

The importance of civic engagement can also be seen in impacts of participation in government. First, since public needs are not automatically served by bureaucracy (whose decisions are often influenced by large financial organizations), civic participation provides a potential counterweight to the

influence of powerful interest groups (Wang, 2001, p. 324). Second, civic participation helps resolve tension and conflict between public demands and management reality. Finally, the public's trust in government decision-making can be greatly increased by civic participation (p. 324).

<div align="center">State of Civic Engagement</div>

Historically, the Western world has been a bastion of civic and political activism. The post-communist world has looked on Western democracies, especially the United States, as models to be emulated. Though the reputation is not fully warranted, America has traditionally been considered unusually civic (Putnam, 1995, p. 65).

Unfortunately, civic participation has decreased significantly in the last three decades. The steady decline has been well documented (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). The number of American citizens who attended a public meeting "in the last year" fell more than one third from 22% in 1973 to 13% in 1993 (p. 67). "By almost every measure, Americans' direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation" (p. 67).

The last two decades have also shown a dramatic increase in social isolation according to the *Saguaro Seminar* at Harvard's Kennedy School (HKS) (2007). From 1985 to 2004, the percentage of Americans who lacked close friends with whom they could discuss important personal matters rose from 10% to 25%. Also, the average number of non-kin friends dropped from 1.4 to 0.98 during the same period (Saguaro Seminar, "Dramatic Increase in Social Isolation

in Last Two Decades" section, para. 2).

Association in the form of community groups has also dropped. From 1994 to 2004, only hobby groups and literary/art groups increased a few percentage points. All other community group membership dropped an average of 19% (Saguaro Seminar, 2007, GSS Decline in Associationalism section, para.1).

Putnam (1995) used the analogy of bowling to illustrate the decline in civic engagement. More Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted (p. 70). Between 1980 and 1993, league bowling decreased by 40 percent. (It should be noted that 80 million Americans went bowling at least once during 1993, which is nearly one third more than voted in the 1994 congressional elections [p. 70].) Bowling leagues are characterized by social interaction and civic conversations over beer and pizza. Solo bowlers forgo that opportunity (p. 70). Putnam makes the point that Americans are overall less engaged, with bowling teams and community groups alike. The bowling metaphor illustrates the lost benefits of face-to-face discussion with fellow citizens.

Putnam says it may be true that bowling teams "illustrate yet another vanishing form of social capital" (p. 71). But his argument is weakened by not addressing non-league bowlers congregating as family or friends. Nowhere in the cited article does Putnam address non-league bowling groups. Plenty of civic dialogue may well take place among members of these groups.

More recently, Blanchard and Matthews (2006) considered the monolithic

power structure resulting from the concentration of corporations in a local economy. Researchers hypothesized that civic participation would be lower in those economies with increased corporate conglomeration since the needs of the corporation often overshadow that of local citizens--leading to civic apathy. They found a correlation between decreased civic engagement (participation in protest activities and voting) and increased corporate concentration (p. 2251).

People are volunteering less, participating less in community activities and even contributing less to charities. They are also voting at decreased rates. Only 39% of the adult population voted in the national elections of 2002. This compares with 51% in 2000 and 65% in 1960 (Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson & Kurpius, 2008, p. 180).

Civic Engagement in Cache County

According to a personal interview I conducted with Randy Watts, mayor of Logan City, there is currently no official accounting of civic engagement levels affecting legislation. There are, however, members of citizen advisory councils personally selected by the mayor to serve on committees lending expertise to elected officials. City council meetings are open to the public and approximately 12 citizens attend each meeting. But these are the only measurements currently available reflecting civic engagement in Logan City. Likewise, Cache County keeps no official record of civic engagement. Citizens are invited to attend county meetings but no official records of attendance are kept.

Citizen engagement should be documented for several reasons. We, the

citizens, pay the wages of government officials. Just as government financial expenditures are recorded and made public, citizen input should also be made public. On any given issue, citizens often act in relative isolation by writing letters, expressing opinion, etc. They usually do not form unions or coalitions. So, it is difficult to ascertain how many other citizens feel the same way. If political civic engagement is documented and made public, government and citizenry are better informed about public opinion. Then, if local legislation does not correlate with expressed opinion, the government can educate citizens of reasons for the discrepancy.

If local government doesn't have the resources to initiate a comprehensive survey of public opinion, they can record civic engagement aimed at affecting legislation. There are numerous ways of doing so without a substantial investment in time or energy. Government can tally numbers of citizens attending meetings and rallies, letters and email received, and petitions signed. They can retain copies of letters to the editor and citizen comments to news stories.

Causes of Civic Disengagement

Americans may choose to be less civically engaged due to a lack of trust--causing many people to disengage psychologically from politics and government (Putnam, 1995, p. 68). "The proportion of Americans who reply that they 'trust the government in Washington' only 'some of the time' or 'almost never' has risen steadily from 30% in 1966 to 75% in 1992" (p. 68). Incidentally, citizens who join community organizations are not only more likely to participate in politics but also

spend more time with neighbors and express social trust (p. 73).

Another serious obstacle to civic participation may be government complexity. Perceived requirements of expertise may lead to citizens' disinterest in the technical details of management (Wang, 2001, p. 333). "The lack of participation depth in decision making suggests the public involvement in many cities is superficial or conventional. Decisions are 'administrative', not 'public', in these governments" (p. 333).

Wilkins (2000) proposed another reason for civic disengagement. Declining political participation, civic engagement, and political trust correspond with the emergence of television as a "leisure activity, replacing collective with individual interests" (p. 569).

Solutions

Scholarly literature proposing solutions to civic disengagement is broad and diverse. A sample of that research will be summarized in the following paragraphs. One novel approach begins in the university classroom. Ervin (1997) perceived students as citizens and the act of writing as an act of citizenship. She attempted to reinvent the classroom as a place in which students could engage in public discourse. "This redefined classroom must be structured so that students see that there is value (both extrinsic and intrinsic) in participating in 'dense networks of interaction' within the classroom" (p. 393). She also referred to her students as "citizen writers" and emphasized that the most engaging opportunities for writing projects come from local needs and not just textbook

assignments (p. 395).

Sproule (2002) saw democracy as more than just the "collecting or tabulating of individual preferences and decisions" (p. 301). In nineteenth-century America, it was the oratorical culture that gave meaning to civic participation. This face-to-face neighborly communicative practice provided an experience of direct listening and presenting viewpoints (p. 301). "Oratorical performance provided a sensory-rich experience in contrast to print-based communication's emphasis on message as an artifact to be perceived and decoded privately" (p. 302). Sproule proposed bringing back the oratory experience of real civic participation.

In addition to student "citizen writers" and public orators, journalists can help facilitate civic engagement. Specifically, public journalists take an active role in promoting deliberative democracy by advocating public listening in news gathering and encouraging public debate (Dzur, 2002, p. 315). Dzur states that news is more than information. Public journalists "make content and narrative choices based on what they think a citizen desiring to be engaged in public affairs would need" (p. 316). They should not only publish dates of meetings and discussions, but also help the public convene to deliberate about public affairs (p. 317). Journalists, rather than resident experts with invested interests, are in a good position to fulfill this role. Journalists are critical to ensure accountability. They are to promote deliberative democracy while providing purposeful and accurate reporting. "Journalists are the key to making representatives vulnerable to public rather than organized interests"(p. 331).

Solutions and the Internet

The advent of new technology like radio and television is accompanied with hopes of transformation to enhance democracy, build communities across borders, and educate and enlighten the population (Lupia & Baird, 2003 p. 77). According to Lupia and Baird (2003), however, commercial entities soon dominate the airwaves and new technology's potential as a community-building tool is never fully realized (p. 77). It is not too late, however, for the Internet. Some solutions solicit the use of media and technology in an effort to engage citizenry.

Some researchers include voting as civic engagement. For the purpose of this project, however, I have cited research assuming civic engagement includes more than activity at the ballot box. Election turnout is sometimes used to measure the incline or decline of civic engagement but it fails to portray an accurate picture of involvement. James K. Batten, former CEO of Knight-Ridder newspaper group, stated once that voter participation is the lowest common denominator of civic engagement (Rosenberry & St. John, 2010, p. 16). Nonetheless, some researchers have shown that voting correlates with other types of civic engagement.

Tolbert and McNeal (2003) studied the relationship between the Internet and political participation. They showed that communication technology helps explain correlations of electoral activity with increased civic participation (p. 177).

Using National Election Survey (NES) data and multivariate analysis, researchers found that people with access to the Internet and online election news were significantly more likely to vote in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections (p. 183). This also correlated with increased civic participation after voting (p. 182).

Researchers illustrated a causal relationship between information-based Internet use and resulting civic engagement. Using a "causal model" that alternates orderings of key variable clusters, civic participation was found to rise with increased political discussion and messaging on the Internet (Shah, Cho, Kwak, & Eveland, 2005, p. 553). More accurately, information-seeking leads to civic engagement "with informational media use encouraging citizen communication, which in turn spurs civic engagement" (p. 551). Using data from a national survey conducted in February 1999, June 2000, and November 2000, researchers found that informational media use on the Internet appeared to increase civic engagement. Although non-Internet information-seeking media like traditional print, broadcast, and face-to-face communication also led to increased levels of civic engagement, Internet use did so at a higher rate (p. 551).

Musso, Weare, and Hale (2000) compared 270 community Websites of local governments in California. They found that 23% strongly emphasized city government in their orientation (p. 9). Careful analysis showed that ten Websites met the standards of exemplary sites. That is, they "provided a rich mix of information and vertical and horizontal communication channels" (p. 15). Specifically, these ideal sites portrayed city government as both local service

providers, and channels of comprehensive information and communication for improving democratic processes. Many sites informed the public of the policy-making process. They included participatory elements that encourage communication with elected officials. And many of these exemplary sites included links to local interest groups, discussions of local issues, and messaging with elected officials (p. 4).

Other studies claim the Internet offers a form of political participation that provides symbolic empowerment to help resolve the problem of civic decline (Bucy & Gregson, 2001, p. 375). The Internet offers "open-mike access to a wide audience, socializes citizens to participate in public affairs, and allows voters to cultivate a civic identity and know their own minds" (p. 375).

The Internet may have potential to increase social empowerment, but too often entrepreneurs and political officials don't use its capabilities to increase deliberation among citizens (Coleman et al., 2008, p. 182). Researchers feel that "social science should strive not only to understand, explain and predict opinions, attitudes and behavior, but also to improve society by finding ways to promote social interaction and civic engagement" (p. 180). To test the Internet's potential of swaying public opinion, Coleman et al. developed an experimental Website designed to encourage civic participation. Assuming users are active and goal-driven in accessing media content, intent to satisfy social and psychological needs, researchers designed a site based on usability--focusing on content, navigation and appearance (p. 187). They found that participants who accessed the usable site had a more positive attitude toward civic engagement than those

of the control group who accessed a Website not designed for usability.

Researchers found that "websites designed for maximum usability that conform

to users' wants and needs in content and appearance can foster positive

attitudes toward civic engagement in citizens" (p. 192-194).

Wellman (2001) included data in his research to illustrate increasing social

connectivity over the Internet. One membership-based forum, Usenet, boasted

8.1 million participants accessing 80,000 topic-related discussion groups in the

year 2000. This is more than three times the number of participants in January

1996 (p. 2031). Internet connectivity facilitates computer networks as inherent

social networks. The Internet as a solution to civic disengagement has increased

people's social capital by increasing contact with family and friends living both far

and near (p. 2033).

Another example of Internet utilization considers social implications of the

Internet and the public. (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001).

Contrary to previous research claims, the Internet appears to complement rather

than displace existing media-related behaviors (p. 307). Although very little

evidence shows the Internet's effect on political knowledge, research does show

that Websites can enhance the capacity for discussion (p. 320). Web discussion

groups are also free from the "selective, highly edited character of letters to the

editor" (p. 320).

Furthermore, discussion on the Internet can be just as effective as face-to-

face deliberation in increasing users' willingness to participate in politics (Min,

2007). Min set up an experiment in which participants were engaged in face-to-

face communication, computer-mediated communication (CMC), or a control group. Participants' issue knowledge, political efficacy, and willingness to participate in politics were the dependent variables (p. 1370). Political efficacy was defined as "an individual's sense of personal competence in influencing the political system" (p. 1371). Political participation was defined as action directed toward influencing political change (p. 1370). All participants were required to follow a strict set of rules ensuring equality and civility. Deliberation had to be rational and based on common interest (p. 1374).

Both the face-to-face group and the CMC group showed a significant increase over the control group in political knowledge, efficacy, and intention to act on political issues. Since this was a true experimental approach, it clearly shows that CMC, or online deliberation, can lead to one's willingness to become more civically engaged. Internet use provides a good alternative to the costly and geographic hurdles associated with face-to-face deliberations (Min, 2007, p. 1381).

Several cautionary notes were emphasized in the work of Shapiro (1999). He warned that the Internet is not inherently democratizing. Although no person or organization owns the technical protocols that allow the Internet to function, "these features are shaped by malleable computer code and subject to alteration, often in ways that may not be obvious to nontechies" (p. 14). One example is China using proxy servers to filter a good deal of foreign content from several sources, including both dissident sites and mainstream sites like *The New York Times* (p. 18).

Citizen Journalism

One instance of civic engagement is citizen journalism. That is, citizens reporting the news about local legislation. The digital environment of today has provided the kind of interactivity needed so audiences may actually become news producers (Kaufhold, Valenzuela, & Gil de Zuniga, 2010, p. 522). Jay Rosen of New York University defines the term. "When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, *that's* citizen journalism" (Rosen, 2008, p. 1). Outing (2005) provides a more nuanced definition describing layers of citizen journalism--that is, the degree to which citizens report the news in collaboration with professional journalists. The first layer may be quite simple—a news agency allowing user comments to criticize a story. Deeper layers include a stand-alone citizen journalism website where citizens do all of the writing, editing, and publishing. Between the two extremes are different levels of collaboration like allowing citizens to blog on a professional news site (p. 5).

Citizen journalism, as a form of civic engagement, also increases levels of participation for those who access citizen-produced media. A study that compared citizen journalism to professional journalism showed the effect on political knowledge and political participation (Kaufhold et al., 2010, p. 522). As with previous studies, it was found that professional journalism fosters political learning. And although citizen journalism fostered slightly less political knowledge than did professional media, it led to more online mobilizing in civic engagement. "people who tend to trust professional journalism will tend to participate less in

political activities, whereas people who have higher levels of trust in citizen journalism will tend to get more involved in politics" (p. 523).

In professional newsrooms, of course, not all editors and journalists fully embrace citizen journalism. Editors cover the spectrum on the degree to which they embrace the idea--approving or disapproving on both philosophical grounds and practical grounds (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010, p. 169). "While some editors regard citizen participation in the news production process as anathema to sound journalism, other editors see it as a central component of the future of journalism….Regardless of their position, though, one thing is clear: editors of community newspapers are *thinking* about citizen journalism" (p. 174).

Citizen journalism, as civic engagement, is perhaps more evident in small community news than mainstream media. One new type of small-niche news has been dubbed "hyperlocal media." And despite the lack of an encompassing definition, there have been efforts to provide a framework for discussion. Generally, it is "a range of journalism acting in the public good and engagement facilitated through interactive media" (Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley, 2011, p. 773). These new sites are sometimes refers to as HLMOs (hyperlocal media operations). Metzgar et al. define them as "geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage on an issue origin and to promote civic engagement" (p. 774) .

Community sites employing Internet technology to enhance citizen engagement on a local level are still fairly new and burgeoning. A good

sustainable model is not easily found. Hundreds of hyperlocal websites have been developed over the last few years. A few examples are listed in appendix F. But not all of these sites are financially sustainable. Community websites vary greatly in the type and reliability of funding that supports them (Kurpius, Metzgar, & Rowley, 2010, p. 359). Most are forced to rely on subsidy-driven rather than market-driven models (p. 373). But while traditional media reliance on advertising has not worked well for community websites, the managers of these sites do hold the potential for developing a sustainable model--partially due to the limited number of entry barriers and low entry cost (p. 372). A further discussion of sustainability is included in the implication portion of this paper.

Sustainable hyperlocal websites

Developing and publishing a quality website is not enough—it should also be sustainable. The term is a slippery one, but a popular definition comes from economics and environmental studies. "Development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 1)

The definition is popular but vague and may not seem applicable to community websites. But it does illuminate the significance of two ideas-- resources and the future. Resources include not only money, but also time, tools, and, most importantly, people. If a community site is to succeed long term, the

proper resources must be allocated to ensure future Internet presence in a meaningful way.

New Voices is a program initiated by the Knight Foundation that awards small grants to seed the launch of innovative community news sites and explores models for sustainability. After a careful analysis of past awardees, they published "Lessons From Funding Five Years of Community News Startups" (Schaffer, 2010, p. 7) The Ten Key Takeaways for a sustainable community website are as follows:

• Engagement is key.
• Citizen journalism is a high-churn, high-touch enterprise.
• Sweat equity counts for a lot.
• Community news sites are not a business yet.
• Social media is game changing.
• Technology can be a blessing and a curse.
• Legacy news outlets are not yet in the game.
• The academic calendar is not good enough.
• Youth media should be supplemental.
• Community radio needs help. (p. 7)

Unfortunately, even some award-winning sites are no longer on the Internet. Publishing an effective community website is not easy—popularity and innovation are not enough. But implementing the ideas listed above just may increase the likelihood of managing a successful sustainable, hyperlocal community site.

Schaffer (2010) also gleans from the experience of award-winners to provide concrete advice for building a community site.

• Start simply with free or open-source software.
• Be sure project leaders stay involved; delegating key talks to grad assistants or volunteers doesn't work.

• Build in a community editor or partnership coordinator on the front end to engage in the high-touch work of teasing out content contributors.
• Hook interest from entities with established infrastructures—agricultural extension agencies, public libraries, community technology centers.
• Try everything. Keep what works and redo what doesn't. Be willing to do so quickly.
• Remember that the community doesn't only want news; it wants connections as well.
• Think of your task as not just covering community, but building it as well. (p. 29)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to build an effective hyperlocal community website, I learned about local civic engagement in Cache Valley, Utah. Specifically, I learned what people are doing to participate in local decision-making and what might be done to enhance those activities using the Internet. I wanted to answer the following questions.

RQ1: How do citizens of Cache Valley use Internet technology in their participation in civic life?

RQ2: What elements of a community-based Web site do these citizens say they would most likely use?

Research was done in the form of interviews and collected data was analyzed. I then designed a community website implementing that data. I will discuss the method of collecting data, how it was analyzed, and the interpretation of data. I will also consider an ideal community website--given unlimited resources--and my actual website.

METHOD

I conducted two group interviews (focus groups) and 20 individual interviews. Since my research questions are specific to Cache Valley and its residents, I wanted to speak to the very people who live and work here. I felt these people are the most valuable sources to gain information about what kind of civic engagement is being done using the Internet and what might facilitate that engagement on a community website. Most interviews were done in person with residents of Cache County and focused on the two research questions listed above.

Each type of interview is a good way to gain information for different reasons. In focus groups, people can generate ideas, ask follow-up questions, and explore reasons behind answers in the context of group discussion. A one-on-one interview is a good way to elicit opinions too sensitive to share in a group setting. It also allows interviewees sufficient space and time to share expertise or anecdotes related to civic engagement.

Overall, the interviews went well. People were cooperative and helpful. Conversations stayed on topic with the help of predetermined questions and every interview provided some bits of information helpful to this project.

Staying "on task," however, was not always easy. Some interviewees diverted into topics unrelated to civic engagement. Since a good interviewer listens, I did so. But I was constantly steering the conversation in the appointed direction to get answers to my research questions.

Focus groups included a diverse group of Cache Valley citizens. Individual interviews were of two types—community "experts" and writers of letters to the editor. The following section will focus on the procedure of those interviews. A more nuanced explanation can be found in the discussion section of this paper.

Focus Groups

Each group interview was held on a weeknight at the Logan City Library in October 2011. Refreshments were served, and both meetings were recorded after obtaining permission from the attendees. The purpose and explanation was emailed to all participants before the meetings and reiterated at the meetings. Each meeting lasted about one hour and participants were invited to complete a survey (Appendix A). Although demographics were not a central part of this research, efforts were made to ensure a diversity of ideas. The surveys were used to measure this. If all group members had the same political leanings, for example, an additional focus group would be justified. But, as discussed in the results section, attendees reported a diversity of political backgrounds.

These meetings were open to the public (residents of Cache Valley) and efforts were made to ensure a representation of diverse ideas. I did so by soliciting participation from a variety of political parties like the Republicans, Democrats, and Libertarians--in addition to other community-minded groups. Fliers were posted at groceries stores, coffee shops, libraries, government buildings, and recreation centers. Interested persons were asked to RSVP. After receiving only three responses, I sent out personal invitations to known

community leaders like former city council members and local activists. There were six people in each group.

Personal Interviews

I interviewed ten "experts." These are people who have specialized knowledge or experience due to their activities with civic engagement in an official or volunteer capacity. Examples include government officials, journalists, political candidates, media professionals, activists, writers, etc. Initially, I made a list of 40 names--people I considered well versed in the area of community engagement or experienced in the media. Some were acquaintances, but most were people I had never met. This list was condensed to 10 (Appendix B). Priority was given to names recommended by Dr. Ted Pease, advisory committee member and current head of the Journalism and Communication Department, during the discussion of my proposal. The remaining people were contacted by email, or phone when necessary, and priority was given to those who responded first.

I personally conducted all interviews in this project—each lasting about one hour. All interviews held with experts were done in person except for one, who could only talk by phone. One interview was held at a café, and all other in-person interviews were done at the person's place of employment. Most interviews were recorded after obtaining permission from the interviewee.

Questions varied depending on the person's experience, occupation, and nuance of the conversation. But focus was placed on finding answers to stated

research questions regarding civic engagement. RQ1: What's being done? RQ2: What could be done? Prepared questions were general and became more specific as the conversation continued. I explained the purpose of my project and often began with a hypothetical situation—a proposed development in their neighborhood, for instance. Some example questions are found in Appendix C.

Citizen interviews were conducted with people who had written letters to the editor published in The Herald Journal. All letters to the editor published on Wednesdays from 08/03/2011 to 11/09/2011 were considered (until 10 interviews were completed). Only authors of letters dealing with local legislative issues qualified for consideration. Authors of those letters were contacted using online search databases like DexKnows.com. Two people declined to be interviewed.

I interviewed 10 people. Some interviews were recorded after obtaining permission from the interviewee. And since many people preferred a phone interview, I conducted only four interviews in person—in their homes or restaurants. In-person interviews lasted about 45 minutes each and phone interviews lasted about 20 minutes each. Questions were prepared but sometimes altered during the interview when necessary (Appendix C).

RESULTS

Data for this project were obtained from interviews with two groups of people and 20 individuals. Audio recordings were transcribed, written notes were deciphered, and a database was compiled of individual "remarks"—each remark consisting of a few sentences. Remarks were considered relevant and marked as

data if they directly or indirectly addressed the research questions. Sometimes anecdotes were also included.

Examples of relevant remarks are one person told of her experience forming a neighborhood committee to change a city ordinance. Another person recommended providing a summary of all city council meetings. Their remarks help answer "What's being done?" and "What could be done?" Interpretation of "relevant" was liberal--I wanted to include as much information as possible. (Throughout this paper, remarks are paraphrased unless otherwise noted by quotation marks.)

The result was 145 remarks assigned to 17 different categories. I developed these categories only after carefully analyzing all data. I tried to invent categories that would help describe the data—rather than attempting to force data into preconceived categories. In other words, the types of categories grew out of the nature of the conversational remarks, not visa versa. This helped make the data more coherent and accessible. It was also a way of parsing out the most relevant remarks and making that information accessible by searching a database. For example, the remark, "Once I get the stop sign I want, I forget about government," was assigned the categories of *hindrance*, *ideology*, and *information flow: citizen to government*. A listing of all 17 categories is in Appendix D.

Some categories proved more useful than others. For instance, the *ideal website* and *actual website* categories were very useful in building an actual website, while the *ideological* category was less helpful in answering research

questions. In the future I will want to alter the site. It will be helpful to search the database for remarks in the *information flow* category, for instance, to ensure the website is interactive.

In this section, I will list the most useful categories, their definitions and a few examples. I will then discuss the focus group survey results. A partial list of remarks addressing RQ1: What is being done? is also included in this section. Remarks addressing RQ2: What can be done? is included in the *website* section of this paper.

Of 17 original categories, the following nine categories proved most useful in analyzing obtained data. Other categories proved too vague or redundant to be included here. Each category includes a definition and example remark.

Useful Categories

CATEGORY	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Experience	*Combines categories of anecdotal and doing now--types of civic engagement activities being done by interviewees*	I formed a citizens group when the county said no to a liquor license for a restaurant. We met with county council members and showed them how this license made sense. It was more about "showing a way" than changing opinions.
Information flow: citizen to government	Communication initiated by residents and intended for local government leaders	Issues should be announced in the mailing with utility bills. Citizens can check a box-- for or against etc. By getting public opinion, the government can make better-informed decisions.
Information flow: government to citizen	Communication initiated by local government leaders and intended for residents.	Takes a lot of interest to sit through a city council meeting. A website could unbiasedly report what happened in the meetings.
Ideal website	Suggestions to be included in a hypothetical "ideal" website assuming unlimited resources	An ideal website should also be in Spanish. Many people can vote but they are illiterate in English. This community has no voice.
Promotion/Marketing	Ways of helping Cache Valley residents know about the website and increasing traffic to the site.	Econet listserv is a network of people interested in local environment issues. Here news travels fast. Also advertise with a letter to the editor.

CATEGORY	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Comments	Refers to citizens' online response to published content--often made anonymously	Anonymous comments can be offensive and turn other people off. They are not considered credible if it is anonymous. But, some feel intimidated to put their name on comments.
Unique ideas	Ideas or experiences that stand out as being extraordinary	Submit questions, citizens vote on the questions. Then once a month, badger the mayor to get the answer. If people know there will be a large discussion, they can bone-up on information--weekly or monthly conversation topics. People vote up or down on conversation topics.
Hindrances	Barriers, real or perceived, to civic engagement	People don't have time to write. People need to be trained how to write persuasive letters. Consider the audience, the purpose, etc.

Focus Group Survey Results

Six people (three from each group) completed a voluntary survey following the focus groups. They were all residents of Logan City and provided their email addresses--indicating they wanted to be notified when the website was complete. This indicated the participants were genuinely interested in the topic. People who completed the surveys expressed varied *political leanings.* Two identified themselves as Libertarians, one Republican, one "middle of the road" and one, "Left for Logan, right for the rest." One respondent left the question unanswered. If all attendees had political leanings to the left, for instance, the conversation and resulting website may be slanted and alienate politically conservative visitors. An accessible and effective community website must be non-partisan.

Four of the six people provided *additional comments about civic engagement*.

"Info is the answer."
"It's discouraging sometimes and grows slowly, but don't give up."
"Civic engagement is critical for a healthy community. It's easy to be cynical--but the best remedy for that is to be involved!"
"Engage in two-way conversations. Comments that generate comments will go much further than pushing on opinion. Engage others who will bring more readers and authors or content providers for opinion seeking."

Experience and RQ1: *How do citizens of Cache Valley use Internet technology in their participation in civic life?*

The category listed above as *experience* combines *anecdotal* and *doing now*. These remarks help answer research question number one: *How do citizens of Cache Valley use Internet technology in their participation in civic life?* Data gained through interviews show that people are using the Internet mostly for email and education. Citizens access websites for information, and respond through email. They use the Internet to write letters to the editor and communicate through listservs. These traditional uses of the Internet may seem unremarkable, but people are using the Internet to do some remarkable things. These same folks also shared numerous ideas about how to use the Internet to better facilitate civic engagement. (See next section.)

The following are some unique civic activities reported by interviewees. (A list of all reported civic activities are found in Appendix E.)

• Some people documented the abuse of nature trails by all-terrain vehicles. They took photos and posted them on a website accompanied by maps and other relevant data.

• Residents concerned about canal breakage and reconstruction formed a network of concerned citizens. In order to educate themselves and others, they solicited the help of experts in the field (i.e., engineers, hydrologists, etc.). They

initiated a listserv (email list) and coordinated letter-writing to the editor. Often a letter was carefully crafted then passed around the group for alterations and editing.

• High Roads for Human Rights, an NGO run by the former mayor of Salt Lake City, holds training sessions on writing. Attendees learn how to write effective letters to the editor by forming well-articulated arguments.

• Envision Utah, an NGO (non-governmental organization), came to Cache Valley and facilitated workshops where citizens voiced their opinions about future growth in Cache County. The meetings were not legally binding, but they were recorded and government officials actively participated in the workshops. Since it involved citizens, the process can hold government accountable and also gives elected officials political cover if they legislate based on workshop results.

• Accounts of writing letters to the editor were frequent. But people did so for different reasons. Some said they had no real agenda. Others said they intended to sway and educate the public. Some wanted to make a change. Most interviewees wrote about topics directly affecting them. One person was rather optimistic in her efforts: "Even if you can't change things, use it as a platform to educate people."

• One respondent assisted his city to better inform citizens about candidates. He worked with a local councilman, collected questions from citizens, and submitted them to candidates running for council.

• There were several reported instances of citizens forming networks to stop the development of open land. Some were more successful than others. Like-minded citizens formed councils, documented their cause, and appealed to local government. These appeals were made in the form of both opinion and legal arguments. Like one interviewee said, "We rally then disperse until the next big thing comes along."

• After years of sustained effort, one resident succeeded by initiating the development of Boulevard Trail. Despite opposition by city parks and recreations, he formed a citizen committee and solicited the county to write a grant. He says it is all tenacity. "It's not who's going to let me, it's who's going to stop me."

• One community organizer was frustrated with lack of attendance at local council meetings. He posted yellow stakes (used to mark the ground for excavation) in certain neighborhoods--accompanied by meeting notices. He even posted signs in Spanish around predominantly English-speaking neighborhoods and visa versa. He said there was standing room only at the next meeting. We then talked about the need for an electronic stake for the Internet—to get people to a community website.

Websites and RQ2: *What elements of a community-based Website do these citizens say they would most likely use?*

Ideal Website

An ideal community website, designed from data obtained for this project, would aim to enhance civic engagement. But before considering such a site, we have to make some assumptions. An ideal site is financially self-sustaining, is visited by thousands of people every day, employs reporters and computer programmers, and has been functional for several years. We also assume time-- both in the long term and the interim. That is, longevity—a well-established site takes years to be effective. It also requires hundreds of hours a week by reporters, techies, and citizens. Given those assumptions, I will discuss elements of an ideal website. This is in consideration of suggestions made by citizens though interviews and focus groups. Namely RQ2: What can be done?

Promotion

One strategy for promoting or marketing the website would be inserting notices with monthly utility bills. Announcements of legislative proposals, including surveys and links to the website, could be mailed with all utility bills— informing a majority of Cache residents. The site could also be promoted by initiating a listserv and gaining access to mailing lists of local organizations like the Econet listserv or targeted nonprofits.

Fliers could be distributed to areas affected by legislative proposals--a very localized effort to solicit the people living in affected neighborhoods. A list of impassioned people can be found by accessing government records. Those residents who voted in primary elections may be the type of people interested in visiting a civic website. Attending local events like Gardener's Market or government meetings can be a good place to obtain people's email addresses.

Trust

Interviewees talked a lot about trust. One interviewee said that people must feel like it's worth their time and effort to contribute to the website, and there is a reason to do so. The website must be enduring and self-sustaining for a long enough time that people trust whoever is running the site. That trust in reporters and editors is gained by being honest, fair, and consistent. One activist said, "Those of us who have been involved in issues don't want to get involved with something that's going to fizzle."

Rewards

The idea of a reward was frequently discussed. People must somehow be rewarded for contributing information to the site. Perhaps coupons or discounts to local businesses can be offered to visitors who contribute well-written material. A focus group attendee suggested giving free gifts like T-shirts or a drawing for an iPod. One inherent reward is "comments." When someone contributes a story to the website, receiving feedback in the form of comments is one type of reward.

Comments

Comments submitted on the website, according to most interviewees, must be well regulated. There seemed a consensus among interviewees that anonymous, unedited comments do more harm than good. Perhaps visitors could rate each other's comments and low-rated ones could be relegated to the bottom of the page or eliminated. Visitors could be required to provide personal information like email addresses in order to comment. This ideal site would include only meaningful contributions that enhance information and civic engagement.

Networking

People are at the center of this website. Networking is key to building community. The site would have an open forum to engage people in conversation focused on opinion, experience, and expertise. Healthy debates would be part of this forum and experts would be invited to comment on issues.

But this type of website is not appealing to everyone. Developers of the site should consider the preferences and input of frequent visitors and alter the site accordingly. The site should appeal to and gain the endorsement of locally respected residents. This enhances trust. Perhaps the names of supporters of a particular cause could be published on the site. Forming relationships with similar

community sites also helps networking. Tapping into local organizations and giving them voice on the site increases credibility.

Ease of Use

An ideal website is easy to use—accessible and uncomplicated. It is well designed and easy to maneuver. Information on the site must be accurate but simple and easy to understand. As one interviewee stated, information should start very simple and increase in complexity. The site would be in English and Spanish, increasing accessibility for Cache Valley citizens.

Content

An ideal site would be as comprehensive as possible—an unbiased one-stop resource for information about local legislation affecting Cache Valley. All government meetings would be included, both city and county—the agenda, video and audio recordings, a summary, etc. The site would include surveys and petitions. Perhaps a phone number would be provided for those interested in giving feedback by phone. Audio messages could be transcribed and sent to appropriate officials.

The site would include an easy way for like-minded people to network, or cooperate on an issue—allowing strangers to rally for a cause. The site would exploit all the advantages of the Internet. In addition to using social media, information would flow in the form of photos, audio, video, and slideshows. Live

coverage of government meetings would be possible. A constant, frequently updated stream of news would be important to ensure people return frequently.

Someone suggested the site should have an interactive map of Logan City. Visitors click on a portion of the map to learn news about that part of town. Another person suggested visitors could submit questions to government officials, then those officials would be solicited to answer questions online or in a real-time forum.

Suggestions come easy, but implementation does not. Building this kind of website is not so easy. Start-up community news sites require ample amounts of money, time, and people--not always available. But some things are within grasp. Tools like domains, website hosting, and pre-programmed themes are all available at a reasonable cost. And now, I also have data. After sifting through the remarks gleaned from interviews, I narrowed those suggestions to a few manageable ideas--few enough to build an actual community site. A website is not the core of this project, but rather the culmination. Largely through trial and error, I wanted to see what might work, answering my second research question: What can be done?

Actual Website

The site, Cache Valley Voice, was developed gradually—covering the span of the entire project with initial attention on design and programming rather than content. Since I am not a computer programmer and lack the funding to hire

one, I resorted to partially programmed themes designed for platforms like Drupel

and WordPress—software designed primarily for blogs. There are many themes

from which to choose. Easy-to-manage themes are cheap and straightforward

but inflexible. More complex themes are expensive and require a learning curve,

but lend themselves to more custom management. After much trial and error, I

chose a theme somewhere in the middle.

Hosting was equally challenging. Cheaper hosting packages, under $100

per month, place websites on a "shared server." This means loading speeds are

affected by the activity of thousands of other sites--resulting in varying download

times.

After choosing (and learning to manage) a desirable theme, finding a

hosting company, designing a logo, and deciding on a layout, I began to

implement some of the many ideas discussed in my interviews.

Fortunately, a few citizens I interviewed were eager to contribute to the

website. Mark, who initiated the Boulevard Trail, owns a housing rental

management company and is well versed with zoning ordinances. He was

interested in a controversial student housing project on 1000 North and 600 East

in Logan. He contributed both text and video on the issue. Another contributor,

Dan, directs the Bear River Watershed Council. He wrote about the proposed ski

resort in Richmond, Utah. With his permission, I posted his coverage of the

issue. Other contributors filled out online surveys, suggested stories, and gave

feedback regarding the website.

Promotion

Promotion of the website has primarily been word of mouth and email. A list of email addresses was compiled beginning with friends, colleagues, interviewees, and anyone expressing interest in the site. I sent periodic emails with hyperlinks to pertinent articles on the website. One contributor, Mark, mentioned the website in his letter to the editor in order to increase traffic, but the letter was not published. The Herald Journal said inclusion of a website's name is considered advertising.

I have also used Facebook and Twitter. Depending upon the quality of status updates and tweets, there is great potential for promoting the website with social media. Business cards have also been placed in neighborhoods affected by certain legislative proposals.

There was much discussion of a "push" or an "electronic stake" to bring people to the site. A newspaper delivered to one's doorstop every morning is a kind of "push." In addition to email notices, I am still mulling over a good way to "push" this website.

Trust

Trust in the people who run a community website is slow coming. But I have tried to maintain a good relationship with the people contributing to the site. The information currently on the site is unbiased and fair to the best of my knowledge. This will also increase trust. I will solicit more contributions from government officials and respected citizens who will increase the site's credibility.

Rewards

A "reward" for visiting the site can come in many forms. Since my site does not accept anonymous comments (see below), there are other feedback/rewards for those who contribute. Simply having one's words published can be a reward. The results of surveys are published on the site. After soliciting questions from visitors, answers to those questions are sought from government officials, etc. One important reward is gained when users find desired information easily and quickly. As one reporter said, "Make it their site, not your site."

Comments

On this site, anonymous comments have been disabled. Rather, I solicit quality contributions by people who are articulate and well versed with the issue under consideration. I have met in person with all people contributing lengthy pieces to the website.

Another substitute to comments is the forum page. One can comment after logging in with his/her email address. After conducting interviews for this project, I don't anticipate enabling anonymous comments.

Networking

The forum page enables people to connect online to engage in legislative processes. I have also been in touch with numerous non-profit organizations and

small networks of people willing to share their information. Information deemed appropriate has been posted on the website.

People are asked to contribute their opinions, experience and expertise on the first page of the site by use of a simple form. I receive the form in my email and respond directly to the visitor. Aside from the forum page, there is still no optimal way for people to form networks on the website. I suspect, however, that tapping into existing networks may be more feasible at this point.

Ease of Use

I have tried to make this site easy to use—from the logo design to the URL name. The colors, format, and organization, I hope, are also easy on the eyes. Most relevant content is accessible from the home page. Other information is only two clicks away. I have taken advantage of the medium--using photos, video, and audio. The site also includes surveys, an events calendar, and several invitations for users to contribute their opinions, story ideas, or questions from the front page.

Content

The design of the site was no small undertaking. Consideration of the logo, colors, graphics, format, etc., was time consuming. I followed the advice of one "expert" interviewee, for instance, and disabled the automatic rotation of photos. He thought the feature was distracting.

A few citizens have contributed their own "stories" relevant to legislative issues. I have helped edit some of that material. Other people have submitted questions. I have vetted those questions and submitted them to government officials. Most questions were useful in my subsequent interviews with politicians.

This site may be fledging and rudimentary, but it is an example of a potentially effective community website enhancing the level of civic engagement in Cache Valley. Currently, activity is low and visitors are few. Without expensive tracking software, exact numbers are unavailable. But activity on the site seems spurred when emails are sent with news stories linked to the site. Six people responded to a survey. About 50 people have subscribed to the email list (some of these may be spam). And about 10 people submitted questions they wanted asked to all candidates running for city council.

DISCUSSION

The raw data for this project was conversation--remarks gleaned from interviews. Great care was taken to manage conversations and stay on task. Interestingly, it was the "experts" who most often veered from the topic of conversation. Perhaps these professionals are used to having their opinions heard. This was a big reason why in-person interviews took longer. (It also takes time to build rapport.) Sometimes simply allowing people time to speak yielded good results for obtaining data.

Most interviewees who wrote letters to the editor appeared to be over the age of 40. I suspected younger people don't often write these letters but I was

still surprised by the data. One filter may have been cell phones. Even if younger people did write, many of them have cell phones rather than landlines. I would be unable to find phone numbers using online databases. Also, *DexKnows.com* provided an estimation of the resident's age. Although the demographics are not part of this research, the finding is worth noting.

In this study, younger people may be underrepresented. But my focus on civic engagement naturally leads to people with a more vested interest in the valley, and perhaps those people are long-time residents.

Another group of people underrepresented in this study may be the civically disengaged. People willing to come to a focus group or be interviewed naturally seem more "engaged." This distinction, however, is problematic. Labeling people as "engaged" or "disengaged," seemed misguided and unproductive.

People's activity often depends on the situation. Context-specific behavior is more relevant than broad categories of engagement or disengagement. And context is the issue under consideration. Someone may be impassioned about environmental degradation only if it affects his/her property. One interviewee said, "Once I get the stop sign I want, I forget about government."

It is more productive to talk about issues affecting people on a personal level and possibilities of change than focusing on disengagement. When people are excited about topics that affect them personally, they seem to offer more useful information pertinent to my research questions.

One unexpected difficulty was soliciting people to attend the focus groups. Attendance was lower than anticipated and I was initially disappointed. I was surprised by people's willingness to meet one on one, and their hesitancy to respond to an advertisement for a public meeting about the same topic.

Nonetheless, I do not regret the size of the focus groups. The discussion was lively and all attendees contributed to the discussion. I closed both discussions after one hour even though the discussion could have continued well beyond the allotted time. In similar studies, to attract more attendees, researchers may have to provide a greater incentive like money or school credit for students.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in managing a civic website will be enticing people to contribute quality information. I asked this question to several interviewees, "How do I get people to contribute information to the website?" Most interviewees didn't provide an answer. One person said, "To get citizens to dig through court records or file a Grama request, that would be the Holy Grail. I don't know how you do that." Some people talked about hurdles. A few respondents emphasized the importance of time—the longevity of the site-- saying citizens will contribute if they know the material will be seen. Others suggested citizens need a strong reward to contribute--money or a drawing for a free iPod. I anticipate soliciting quality contributions from citizens will be the most difficult aspect of running this website. In the words of one interviewee, "The more people who participate, the better the product will be at the end of the day."

IMPLICATIONS

Gleaning from my own experience with this project, I learned to build on that which is already in place. That is, give voice to the citizens who are already engaged. Activity could be in the form of running a non-profit environmental organization. Or it could be a simple impassioned discussion across the fence with neighbors. Desire is already there—give voice to those possessing the desire to engage.

In the process of building this site and interviewing people, I met people who went to government buildings, rifled through records, and composed a worthy body of information. These people would benefit from a larger audience. These people provide resources in ways that a traditional newspaper cannot. Perhaps journalistic training, and some editing, is all that's necessary to turn citizens into citizen journalists.

In fact, it seemed like an imposition at times—asking people to submit information just for my web project. Citizens are impassioned, but there is a risk to speaking up. Feelings do not always translate into action. People risk hurting relationships with neighbors, church groups, colloquies, and friends. They risk being wrong. A lack of confidence in writing easily kills a potential letter to the editor. The idea of asking someone to act strictly for my website seems ludicrous. Instead, a community site should be guided by the desires of the community members, expressed by what they are currently doing and what they want to do. It is wise to engage with community members before asking them to share their experience, knowledge, and opinions.

Further research is certainly needed, but perhaps in a new direction. It feels somewhat contrived—professors creating community sites for the sake of experimentation. An organic grassroots foundation is lacking here. Perhaps more research could be descriptive, rather than experimental or prescriptive. There are a number of successful community sites--born of the community, for the community. Simply watching, analyzing, and describing the inner workings of these sites could be very beneficial.

More research should also focus on the melding of activism and journalism. As I perused hundreds of websites for this project, these two "isms" seemed almost mutually exclusive. Websites heavy on activism, usually with a clear bias, were lacking journalistic coverage of important issues. News sites, while soliciting audiences to participate journalistically, did little to entice people to act politically. It is possible to report on polarizing issues in an honest journalistic manner while assertively encouraging people to act politically, even providing the tools to do so. Further research in this area would bolster the community's (and nation's) efforts to create a new, and much needed, journalism.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, this project is about human connection. And the Internet can facilitate but never replace that connection. Jim Laub, a well-known developer and owner of Cache Valley Electric, most likely agrees. After unexpected opposition to his development plans of turning a small, dilapidated building into a cafe on Canyon Road, he decided to personally connect with the neighbors by

initiating a community meeting. I attended that meeting. Residents, architects,

developers, and two city council representatives filled the small, gutted building.

People were opinionated and vocal, but polite. City council eventually approved

the project. But the face-to-face meeting enabled opposing parties to voice their

opinion in a constructive manner. Concessions were offered and citizens had

influence on the final construction plans. As one citizen said, "Those who attend

the meetings, control the world."

Nonetheless, not everyone attends those meetings. And the Internet can

be the solution for those who can't or won't. Civic influence should be meaningful

and done with knowledge. But it should also be easy. Not all citizens can or want

to invest large amounts of time and energy. As one interviewee explained, it is

the complexity that creates apathy.

Interviews with citizens of Cache Valley illustrate there is will. People are

currently engaged in diverse and meaningful ways--ways that government

ignores. Virtual interactions will never replace the power of face-to-face

meetings, but they can provide citizens with more information and easy ways to

communicate with elected officials. Community news sites coupled with

interactive web technology make novel modes of civic engagement within reach.

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Appendix A. Survey

Please fill out the following survey. Participation is voluntary and all answers will be confidential (and destroyed upon completion of the project).

1) City of residence:

2) Describe your political leanings:

3) Would you like to be notified when this website is completed?

If yes, please provide your email address below.
(Email addresses will be kept confidential)

Email address: _____

4) Additional comments about civic engagement:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this discussion.

Appendix B. Experts

Tom Jensen
Logan City Council member. Owner and founder of Architectural Nexus.
Tom was a candidate for city council at the time of the interview.

Joe Pyrah
Graduate of Utah State University and former journalist for The Daily Herald and
The Standard-Examiner. He is currently the chief deputy of the Utah House of
Representatives.

Star Coulbrooke
English Department faculty member at Utah State University and executive
director of Oneida Narrows.

Carrie Bringhurst
News director and host of *Morning Edition* at Utah Public Radio.

Angela Fonnesbeck
Attorney at Law in Logan, Utah and former candidate for Logan City Council.
Angela was a candidate for office at the time of the interview.

Rocky Anderson
Former mayor of Salt Lake City and currently running for president of the United
States.

Kevin Fayles
Community relations manager for Envision Utah.

Bryan Dixon
Environmentalist and secretary of the Bridgerland Audubon Society.

Dave South
Computer programmer and founder of the Smithfield Sun, a local online
newspaper.

Josh Loftin
Journalist for the Associated Press. Former reporter for City Weekly and Deseret
News.

Appendix C. Questions

Potential questions for focus groups and interviews (Questions are written here to be conversational and sound natural when spoken).

Introduction:

Hello everyone, and thank you for coming tonight. I'm glad you could make it. My name is Dave Wind. I'm a graduate student in journalism at Utah State University and this discussion group is part of my project. I hope you can see this as an informal discussion and feel comfortable to participate--please participate. I simply want to know your opinions. There are no right or wrong answers.

I am interested in learning about civic engagement then implementing what I learn into a local community-based Website to serve Cache Valley. For our discussion tonight, "civic engagement" is limited to the following definition.

Involvement by Cache Valley citizens in local decision-making processes including but not limited to A) attending public hearings such as city council meetings, citizen forums, community neighborhood meetings, and citizen advisory groups; B) participating in citizen surveys and focus groups; C) contacting government leaders by phone, letter, or email with the intent of expressing opinion on local governance; D) writing letters to the editor or joining a protest, rally, or vigil highlighting issues affecting the citizens of Cache Valley; and E) using the Internet to participate in these activities.

I will pose some questions to get the discussion going. If you have any questions

along the way, please feel free to ask them.

1. Let's pretend, for a minute, that Cache County is considering a proposal to build a raw sewage treatment plant located about 500 yards upwind from your house. What would be your first reaction? If you wanted more information, where would you turn? Would you use the Internet? Why or why not? If so, how exactly would you use the Internet to find information to act on?

2. Can you think of people you know who seem very civically active? I'm not interested in names, but do you have friends or family you consider civically engaged? How do they do it? What resources are they using to get the work done? Do they use the Internet? If so, how? What about particular websites or software programs?

3. Can you think of ways you've been civically engaged in the last year? What are they? What issues or topics did you work on?

4. Can you think of some difficulties or hurdles to being more civically active? What are they? What are some ideas on resolving these hurdles?

5. If you are doing some kind of civic activity, and you use the Internet, what exactly do you do on the Internet? Are there particular programs or websites you use? What part of using the Internet do you find most useful?

6. If you had unlimited time and resources and could build your own community-based website to help people become more civically active, what would it look like? What kind of features would it have? What would the website consist of? Can you think of any real life websites close to this? What are they?

7. What do you think about the idea of posting comments to news stories? What are the pros and cons? What do you like or dislike about posting comments to news sites? Have you ever done it? Why or why not?

8. Similar to holding this discussion group, what are some other things I can do "on the ground," away from the computer screen, and more people-based, to make a website effective at increasing civic activity?

9. What are the best ways to let people know about the website eventually developed for this project?

ADDITIONAL QUESITONS FOR ONE-ON-ON INTERVIEWS

How do you rally your constituent base to express opinion on a particular issue?

What methods are currently in place to solicit opinions from citizens?

To what extent is decision making on a city or county level swayed by public opinion?

In what form is this public opinion articulated?

Appendix D. All Categories

CATEGORY	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Anecdotal	Past experience relating to civic engagement	Hosted a panel session to educate people about a proposal to build a dam at Amalga Barrens
Ideological	More general, abstract remarks about ways of thinking	e.g., "[We] spend so much time trying to keep up our lifestyle...our civic systems suffer."
Information flow: *citizen to government*	Communication initiated by citizens for local governement	I formed a citizens group when the county said no to a liquor license for a restaurant. We met with county council members and showed them how this license made sense. It was more about "showing a way" than changing opinions.
Information flow: *citizen to citizen*	Communication initiated by local government for citizens	Takes a lot of interest to sit through a city council meeting. A website could unbiasedly report what happened in the meetings.
Information flow: *government to citizen*	Communication initiated by citizens for citizens	Issues should be announced in the mailing with utility bills. Citizens can check a box-- for or against etc. By getting public opinion, the government can make better-informed decisions.
Offline work	Ideas to do off the Internet, i.e., "on the ground"	A flier posted that leads people to Facebook etc.
Online work	Ideas to do on the Internet or a website	People sign up for what they want to hear. Email groups would be issue-based.

Actual website	Ideas to incorporate on a website built for this project	Use Facebook and Twitter in connection with the website. That's how information travels.
Ideal website	Ideas to be considered on an "ideal" website with unlimited resources	An ideal website should also be in Spanish. Many people can vote but they are illiterate in English. This community has no voice.
Design of website	Suggestions regarding the look a feel of a website, i.e., colors etc.	Rotating pictures moving on the site gets old. Do a stream.
Technical aspects of website	Specific features to be programmed into a community website	Include surveys on the website.
Promotion/Marketing	Ways of letting people know about the website	Econet listserv is a network of people interested in local environment issues. Here news travels fast. You can also advertise through a letter to the editor.
Comments	Citizens' online response to published content	Anonymous comments can be offensive and turn other people off. They are not considered credible if it is anonymous. But, some feel intimidated to put their name on comments.
Media	Any remark referring to the news delivery in audio, video or print	Media does pretty good job but if something is Newton specific, the rest of the valley doesn't care.
Doing now	Past experience relating to civic engagement	Currently working to enforce laws against off-road vehicles on prohibited roads.
Unique ideas	Ideas or experiences that stand out as being extraordinary	Submit questions, citizens vote on the questions. Then once a month, badger the mayor to get the answer. If people know there will be a large

		discussion, they can bone-up on information-- weekly of monthly conversation topics. People vote up or down on conversation topics.
Hindrances	Barriers, real or perceived, to civic engagement	People don't have time to write. People need to be trained how to write persuasive letters. Consider the audience, the purpose, etc.

Appendix E. Examples of Reported Civic Engagement

Wrote LTTE to inform public and help them make a change.
Wrote LTTE to educate the people.
Read newspapers and access my networks.
Assisted the city to inform citizens about candidates.
Formed networks.
Attend meetings.
Collected questions from citizens then sent them to candidates.
Used list serves to communicate and network.
Developed a group to work on the canal issue and solicited professionals to give information.
Designate some people to write then sent the letter around for editing.
Been attacked on all sides by comments to my LTTE.
Developer wanted to build on green space in my backyard--citizens formed a group and stopped him.
Was a registered lobbyist.
Just talking to other people.
Frequently call the White House.
Jim Laub and Herm's Inn.
Form citizens group to find solution to business owner soliciting alcohol license.
Used online petitions for Onida Narrows.
Used social media.
Used neighborhood councils.
Disappointed with news coverage of South American wars in the 70s. Formed a group of people to go there and get the facts.
With High Road for Human Rights, conducts workshops to train people how to write LTTE.
Envision Dixie, helping government and citizens work together transparently to plan for the future of the region.
Stopped proposal to build dike at Amala Barrens by forming council with citizens and corporation.
Neighbors formed committees and left fliers on doors.
Wrote LTTE to vent and sway.
Watch and photograph people on prohibited roads with their ATVs. Then publish them on my website.
Attended council meetings.

Rallied for a cause.
Got boulevard trail installed by having the county write a grant.
Started Logan Newcomers Site.
Set up booth at Gardner's Market.
Developer wanted to change the code, got together and used facts to stop him from doing so.
Complained about the lack of streetlights for children crossing the street.
Used yellow stakes in the ground to get people to a meeting--English in Spanish-speaking areas and visa versa.

Appendix F. Example Sites

Heights Observer
http://www.heightsobserver.org

Valley Independent Sentinel
http://valley.newhavenindependent.org

Philadelphia Neighborhoods
http://sct.temple.edu/blogs/murl

Great Lakes Echo
http://www.greatlakesecho.org

Vermont Digger
http://vtdigger.org

Plan Philly
http://planphilly.com

Voice of San Diego
http://www.voiceofsandiego.org

New Castle Now
http://www.newcastlenow.org

Grand Ave. News
http://www.grandavenews.com

Madison Commons
http://www.madisoncommons.org

Austin Talks
http://austintalks.org

Wisconsin Watch
http://www.wisconsinwatch.org

Tucson Citizen
http://www.tucsoncitizen.com

Grosse Point Today
http://grossepointetoday.com

New West

http://www.newwest.net
The Forum
http://www.forumhome.org

Minn Post
http://www.minnpost.com

Locally Grown Northfield
http://www.locallygrownnorthfield.org