Planning in the age of Facebook: the role of social networking in planning processes

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Abstract There has been rapid growth in the use of online social networking sites, such as Facebook. The public is increasingly using these sites for organizing around place-based issues. This research examines the extent to which the public and planners are using social networking sites to organize the public around place-based planning issues. Using content analysis of social networking sites, place-based planning groups are identified and analyzed. The administrators for the groups were contacted to determine their goals and satisfaction with their groups' work. Planning departments in the same communities were then contacted to determine the degree to which the social networking groups influenced the planning process. The results of this study found that the public primarily organizes to oppose development projects. While on average these groups attract hundreds of people, planners and group administrators report that there is minimal influence on the planning process.

Keywords Public participation · Social networking · Urban planning · Facebook · Zoning

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Introduction

The Internet has become as ubiquitous as other communication devices, such as the telephone, the short message service (SMS), and in-person interactions. It is a significant part of the way in which people establish and maintain their social ties, creating what Castells (2001) describes as the portfolio of sociability. Devisch (2008) argues that planners need to use new communication tools that allow for the involvement of a variety of stakeholders online. The focus of this article is on what Arnold (2003, p. 83) describes as the "killer application" of the Internet, social interaction.

Online social networking has grown exponentially over the last few years with the emergence of sites such as Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, and others. These sites have grown rapidly; for example, Facebook has more than 175 million users and MySpace has more than 110 million active users (Inside Facebook 2009; Owyang 2008). This technology is pervasive among certain user groups. For example, a 2005 study found that 90% of undergraduates participated in an online social network (Stutzman 2006), while those over 35 are the fastest growing group joining Facebook (Inside Facebook 2009). In part, the reason that online social networks have grown increasingly pervasive is that they offer opportunities for more than just business relationships, allowing a sense of intimacy that enables friendships to flourish (Power et al. 2006). This sense of intimacy may be an important factor in

enabling planners to make deeper connections with the public, thereby encouraging greater interaction.

Understanding how planners can increase the quality of interaction with online social networks has the potential to lead to successful participatory planning efforts. Online communication has not diminished the importance of local place (Foth 2006), but instead provides a medium to extend place-based interactions.

The extension of place-based interactions can happen in a number of ways. As new technologies emerge, such as online social networks, there is an opportunity for amateur action, for example capturing video and posting it to a Facebook page (Sandvig 2003). Gaved and Mulholland (2008) argue that as city planners use the possibilities of technology to enhance cities, there are individuals and groups within the community that are also finding new ways to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) and learning how they can use these tools to augment their cities. For planners, the potential for both planners and the public alike to form groups around place-based planning issues offers an interesting opportunity for engagement. Members of a social networking site can create their own themed groups on any topic and invite other members to join. When a person joins a group they become a "friend" of that group. In groups, members can post to message boards, add pictures and videos, and post news and links. "Friends" can share a new story, video, or web page with other members, and they can respond to items posted by others, sharing their own opinions or adding information. Groups provide a setting for like-minded people to discuss issues. Most online social networking groups are focused on a particular perspective on an issue. This paper seeks to explore this idea to understand the degree to which the public and planners are using online social networks for action in planning.

One interesting potential of online social networking groups is the ability of groups to organize members to take action around a common goal. For example, in Calgary, Alberta a nightclub called Cowboys wanted to relocate, but the relocation was turned down by the planning commission. Four Facebook groups then organized to discuss the development proposals. A group called Vote for Cowboys, which had 2,600 members, provided continuous updates about the planning process. There were also three anti-Cowboys

Facebook groups, none with more than 30 members. When the application was being considered by the Subdivision and Development Appeal Board, the board received more than 250 formal letters of opposition to the relocation. While there was a lot of interest online in supporting the relocation, this did not translate into people voicing their support through the appropriate channel at the hearing before the Appeal Board (Toderian 2008). This example illustrates a public level of interest in planning issues, but it also points out that there are significant challenges in converting online support into support through the traditional public hearing process.

For planners, the greatest benefit of Facebook is the possibility of mobilizing and organizing citizens to participate in planning processes. As the Calgary example illustrates, the public are willing to come together. With the boom in social networking, the author wanted to understand how planners can use social networking as another tool in the public participation toolbox. This article explores how planners and the public are using social networking to discuss place-based planning issues. The literature suggests that online social networks will result in strengthened ties, and that online interactions will result in in-person interactions on place-based planning issues. This article asks the question, do online, place-based planning groups result in increased face-to-face interaction? Do citizens who organize online to participate in planning then influence the planning process through more formal in-person experiences?

Literature review

There is limited academic work examining online social networks as they relate to planning. However, planners can learn from the work of other disciplines that have conducted research on online social networks. While there is fast-growing adoption of online social networks, their use is not universal and there are specific issues of which planners need to be aware before engaging in using social networking sites for planning purposes.

In part, planners have an interest in using online social networking as a way to engage a younger population, which has typically been underrepresented in traditional in-person participatory processes. A MacArthur Foundation study found that youth

almost always associate with people whom they already know in person when they are online. They spend most of their time online hanging out with their in-person friends. A small number are willing to "geek out", reaching out to find other people with expertise and interest in particular areas. It is important to understand that while youth are willing to interact with adults, the typical expectation of expertise in the relationship is turned on its head online. Youth expect to be treated as experts and prefer to be in a social network where experts are respected regardless of age Ito et al. 2008. Planners will need to redesign the participatory process to engage youth on their terms, allowing them to share their expertise.

While some groups have rapidly adopted online social networks, online social network usage is in part based on gender, race and ethnicity, and parental educational background, indicating that there is digital inequality (Boyd 2007; Hargittai 2007). Urban alienation is also a considerable issue (Wellman 2001). While ICT makes it possible for urban dwellers to interact with each other in additional ways, they do not necessarily overcome urban alienation (Walmsley 2000). Planners should view online social networks as one more tool in the participatory toolbox, but for a truly inclusive process it should be used as part of a broader participatory process.

While not all people participate in online social networks, Trogemann et al. (2008) argue that portals such as Facebook have begun to compete with the physical street as the preferred place to be seen. If the online world is the preferred place to be seen, then how you present yourself there is significant. Dalsgaard (2008) argues that online social networking sites create a new form of presentation of self that focuses on the social relations of the person rather than the person as an individual. This focus on social relations is important because social networking allows for a public display of connections that signal one's identity (Donath and Boyd 2004). Research specifically on Facebook has focused on the importance of identity presentation (Gross and Acquisti 2005; Stutzman 2006; Tufekci 2008; Walther et al. 2008). For example, you only want to show your friends that you associate with certain people and certain organizations. A typical high school experience that is analogous to Facebook would be to only want to be seen associating with the cool kids or participating in organizations deemed to be cool. Associating with

certain kinds of people and certain organizations could hurt an individual's image. This shows the importance of how planners package what they are doing to create a group that would potentially enhance the image of those who join it.

There are also limits to the number of friends that one can reasonably have in online social networks. Having too many or too few friends limits the coolness factor (Sundar et al. 2007. People who have too many friends may be viewed negatively as spending time online out of desperation rather than popularity. It sends the message that they are spending too much time online rather than off-line interacting with friends in person. Dunbar (1996) suggests that there are biological and sociological reasons to limit a social network. Additionally, online social networking sites limit the number of groups to which one can belong. For example, Facebook limits users to joining 200 groups (Facebook 2009). This limitation on the number of connections within a network has implications for planning. If a person has a limit on how many social connections they can support, it may be a challenge for a planner to create and sustain a connection.

Social capital, whether actual or virtual, is created by a group that possesses a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships between mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bordieu and Wacquant 1992). Putnam (2000) argues that social capital has been declining in the US. When social capital declines, it can reduce participation in civic activities. When social capital increases, it can result in an increased commitment to a community (Helliwell and Putnam 2004). Putnam finds that the decrease in social capital is the result of the long-term decrease in participation in voluntary associations. Some argue that online interactions may supplement or replace interactions that, in the past, were formed in voluntary organizations (Wellman et al. 2001). Facebook and other similar social networking sites that support loose social ties, allow individuals to create diffuse networks of relationships (Donath and Boyd 2004; Resnick 2001; Wellman et al. 2001). Studies have found that onsite communities supported by online networks have had positive effects on community interaction, involvement, and social capital (Day 2002; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Kavanaugh and Patterson 2001; Kavanaugh et al. 2005). A study of Facebook found that the networking site had a large impact on students' ability to develop and maintain bridging social capital

at college (Ellison et al. 2006). Those who are successful in building social capital are able to grow relationships, while those with poor social capital continue to have few relationships (Hampton and Wellman 2003; Jankowski et al. 2001).

Donath and Boyd (2004) hypothesize that online social networks may not increase the number of strong ties, but could greatly increase the weak ties one could form and maintain because sites like Facebook are well-suited to maintaining weak ties. In many planning processes, there are loose connections between social network members; for example, there is a lack of direct links among all the participants (Granovetter 1982). This lack of direct links can increase the efficiency of information flows within a larger network. Members of a social network act as ties to sub-networks, such as individual neighborhood groups. The absence of direct ties supports the importing and exporting of new information and ideas between the sub-groups (Burt 2000). In most planning situations, planners are looking for "bridging" social capital, which is inclusive and allows for weak connections between individuals who may provide useful information or new perspectives to one another (Putnam 2000). Some researchers argue that the Internet has supplemented off-line interactions with online interactions (Fallows 2004; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). For example, if a person sees a television show that they really like, they may choose to extend that interaction by becoming a fan on Facebook. Another example is using an online social network to make plans with a neighbor to get together in person. The Internet and mobile phones allow people to maintain social ties in different ways. It is now possible to post pictures directly to a Facebook profile, which allows people to see pictures in an almost real-time manner.

Not all social ties are either totally on-line or off-line, as much on-line contact is between people who see each other in person and live locally (Wellman et al. 1996). Most online interaction is between people who can easily reach each other physically, such as individuals who live in the same city (Horrigan 2001; Horrigan et al. 2001). Some planners hope that online social networking will be a panacea that will allow them to engage with all kinds of people with whom they have never interacted before.

In reality, it is likely that citizens that already participate in traditional venues will extend their participation into the online world. Online social networks are designed to support both the maintenance of existing relationships and the creation of new relationships (Hampton and Wellman 2003). Watters (2003) finds that there is a desire to create groups when people share a place-based connection and are connected through strong and weak ties. Another reason for connectivity is community activism. The Internet and telephones do help people construct their social networks. Relationships are transforming from place-to-place, typically limited to immediate surroundings, to person-to-person and role-to-role relationships (Wellman 2001, 2002; Wellman et al. 2003). For Facebook users, one study found that because users share offline connections, they are likely to anticipate meeting one another in offline spaces (Ellison et al. 2006). The result is what Wellman terms networked individualism. Planners typically have many weak ties to the public through people who have attended one public meeting or sent an e-mail to a planning office. These weak ties can be increased through the use of online social networks. Providing the public with the opportunity to connect through online social networks is one more opportunity to strengthen social ties.

It is not possible to simply build an online social network and expect the public to join it. Research has found that the network needs to be place-based and address sociocultural factors (Arnold et al. 2003; Butler 2001; Day and Schuler 2004; Gilchrist 2004; Maloney-Krichmar et al. 2002; Patterson and Kavanaugh 2001; Pinkett 2003; Rheingold 2002). Having a common local problem that affects multiple residents is a reason for people to come together (Foth and Brereton 2004; Hampton 2003). Rheingold (2000) finds that there is a connection between online and offline social networks—effectively, that online connections result in face-to-face meetings (Parks and Floyd; Rheingold 2000). In part, this may be attributable to the viral nature of social networks. For example, my friend Donnell and I may become Facebook friends. Then one of Donnell's friends, Jeff, may friend me on Facebook. Jeff and I may then begin to interact online, which increases our odds of meeting in person. The same type of interaction can happen with a planning organization. If a planning organization already has a core group of members, the friends of those members may be interested in joining the planning organization. For example, I could be a

member of a local traffic calming group, which may let me know about another regional traffic calming initiative. I may then choose to become involved with this new group and participate in their activities. A planner can use the power of social networks to spread the word about an event. For example, if the planning organization has 100 members in its social networking group, and an announcement about an upcoming meeting is sent out, 10 people may respond that they will be attending. Their RSVPs will be posted to their profiles, that allows all of the members' friends to learn about the event. If each of the 10 people RSVPing to the event have 300 friends, the planner has just alerted 3,000 people about an upcoming public meeting, which may result in additional people deciding to attend the event. However, there are limitations to the spread of information. The idea of the public has changed, moving from a unified body to increasingly specific demographic categories (Boyd 2007; Shepard 2008). Thelwall (2008) found that people who created friendships in MySpace tended to friend people with similarities in ethnicity, religion, age, martial status, and sexual orientation, among other attributes. The challenge is that in broadcasting to many individuals, a planning organization is less likely to reach diverse groups of people because friendship networks tend to be highly segmented demographically.

The social behavior that has emerged as a result of the Internet offers challenges to conventional understandings of place and public places, opening opportunities for architecture, city planning, and urban design (Castells 2004; Florida 2003; Grosz 2001; Horan 2000; Mitchell 2003; Oldenburg 2001; Walmsley 2000). There has been limited research on the use of ICT in place-based contexts (Papadakis 2004). Most of it has investigated the use of technology in deprived communities. A shared sense of deprivation may lead to support for collective action for change (Foth 2004). Hampton and Wellman (2003), in a study of a Toronto neighborhood, found that technology enhances the place-based community and facilitates the generation of social capital. Other studies intended to create online community networks for place-based residential sites have had varying degrees of success (Arnold 2003; Carroll and Rosson 2003; Cohill and Kavanaugh 2000; De Cindio et al. 2003; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Meredyth et al. 2004; Pinkett 2003).

Place and proximity continue to be important because online social networks cannot be a complete substitute for real-time, face-to-face interaction (Foth 2006). For planners, this is an ideal situation, in which people can both provide online communication and participate in face-to-face interaction.

This article explores real-life use of online social networks for place-based planning issues, exploring the degree to which the theoretical ideas of how people will interact can be observed in planning.

Methodology

This study undertook a three-part analysis, including a review of social networking groups, a survey of group administrators, and a survey of local government planning departments. A first step was identifying social networking groups formed to discuss place-based planning issues in order to identify place-based planning groups. Between January and March of 2009, English keyword searches of BlackPlanet, Facebook, Friendster, Ning, and MySpace were completed. Keyword searches included the following terms: comprehensive plan, neighborhood/neighbourhood plan, master plan, community plan, development plan, zoning, no development, stop development, and new development. Additionally, the following groups were searched: Geography-Cities, Geography-Neighborhood, and Organizations-Community Organizations, each followed by a search term. An example of the results of one of these searches was a site created by a resident opposed to the development of a Walgreen's pharmacy in their neighborhood. All of the searches resulted in the identification of 98 groups in seven countries, primarily in Canada (22), the United Kingdom (26), and the United States (42).

Various attributes of each group identified were documented, including the social networking site, the name of the group, whether it was citizen or government initiated, its location, its number of members, and the extent of its use of the available features on the social networking site. Features included wall postings, discussions, events, photographs, video, and links.

Upon completion of the documentation for each group, the administrator of each group was contacted. Four of the groups had bad administrator e-mail addresses and five of them did not provide contact

information for a group administrator. Each of the remaining 89 group administrators were contacted and asked to complete a survey regarding their group. Group administrators were asked a series of questions about their group, including:

- Why did you decide to start a group, when did the group start, and when does group expect to end?
- Was the group started by you individually, for a client, or for an organization?
- How many other groups have you started?
- How have you advertised the group, was usage tracked, and how many people did you hope to have join the group?
- What features of the social networking site were used in the group?
- Respondents were also asked a series of questions comparing traditional participation formats to the social network, including information received, usefulness of input, knowledge level of participants, and whether the social network participants were new participants.
- Open-ended questions focused on the administrators' expectations of involvement in the planning process and the degree of participation at on-site meetings.
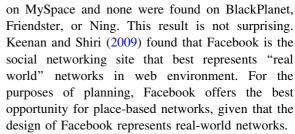
A total of 34 group administrators responded (38%) to the survey.

In addition, for the public-initiated groups, each corresponding local government planning department was contacted to determine the extent to which the group had influenced the planning process. Contact information was identified for the local government of 53 of the groups, with 18 responding (34% response rate). The planning department representatives were asked whether they were aware of the social networking groups and whether they monitored them. They were then asked a series of questions about the degree of influence that the social networking groups had on the planning process.

Results

Analysis of social networking groups

Facebook is the dominant social networking site for planning-related groups. Of the 98 English-speaking groups found, 96 used Facebook. Two were located on MySpace and none were found on BlackPlanet, Friendster, or Ning. This result is not surprising. Keenan and Shiri (2009) found that Facebook is the social networking site that best represents "real world" networks in web environment. For the purposes of planning, Facebook offers the best opportunity for place-based networks, given that the design of Facebook represents real-world networks.

The vast majority of social networking groups are established by the public (91%). There were nine groups established by local governments—six in the US, one in the UK, and two in Canada. All of the government-created groups were focused on the creation of a neighborhood, community, or regional plan.

The number of members in the groups varied significantly, ranging from two to 3,846 friends. The public-initiated groups had an average of 297 members, while the government-initiated groups had on average just 29 friends. Of the 10 largest groups, nine were focused on stopping a specific development project. Overall, the majority of groups were opposed to a development or plan (80%). The Save the Meadows group in Edinburgh, UK had the largest number of members. This is a group of young residents who believe that "over-development in the vicinity of the Meadows is a huge problem. We're looking to expand and get as many concerned people involved in direction action and campaigning as we can" (Barnes-Ford 2008). The Save the Meadows group is focused around fighting 2.9 billion pounds of affordable student apartments in six- to seven-story buildings.

The groups frequently post wall postings (80%), averaging 44 postings per group. Fifty-three percent of groups posted discussion postings, with an average of 7 posts per group. Links were used by 52% of groups, while photos were used by 47%. The least-used features were events (17%) and video (8%). There were interesting uses of all of these tools. The Mill Valley against Miller Avenue Precise Plan group posted video of questions being asked at a public meeting on the plan. The Protect the Culture of Isla Vista—Fight the IV Master Plan group had good participation, with many of the 1,348 members participating in the discussion. The Stop Donald Trump Ruining Aberdeenshire's Coastline group included numerous photographs of the beach conditions as well as a picture of a group holding a sign that reads "Don't Trump On Our Dunes."

Group administrator survey results

The group administrators that were surveyed reported that they started their social networking groups for several reasons: (1) to spread the word and create awareness about a planning issue; (2) to attract more participation, particularly from youth; and (3) to engage the community in discussion. Interestingly, one group administrator reported that he formed their Facebook group for the sole purpose of getting more time in front of the Washington, D.C. Zoning Commission, which provides groups with more time than individual citizens at their hearings.

Approximately one-half of the group administrators reported that their groups were the first time that they had created a social networking group. The majority (74%) started their groups individually, while 23% created their groups for an organization, and 3% for a client. Most group administrators reported that their groups were intended to be short term and to be discontinued once the planning issue was resolved; however, 15% reported that they intended their groups to be ongoing.

The group administrators advertised their groups in several ways: (1) through word of mouth, (2) at meetings, on fliers, in newspapers, and on websites; and (3) through e-mail and social network friend invitations. When asked about how many people the administrator expected to join the group, 18% expected 50 or less people, 6% expected between 50 and 99, 48 percent expected 100 or more people, and 28% did not have any specific expectation. Fifty-eight

percent of group administrators tracked the usage of their groups. The group administrators generally expected membership to be higher than they received. For example, the Heart Lake High Rise Plan group expected more than 1,000 members and achieved 124. In part, this may be attributable to the lack of experience of these administrators in creating groups and in marketing them to others. While the number of participants may not have been what the administrators hoped for, the administrators did believe that the people who participated were largely new (56%) rather than the same people who typically attend traditional meeting formats.

The group administrators varied in their opinions about how much input was received through the online groups versus what would be received in traditional meeting formats. Forty-seven percent believed that the online groups generated some or much more input, while 35% believed that they generated less input. Administrators generally viewed the usefulness of the input from online and traditional sources to be about the same (35%), with an equal split of those who felt that online input was more or less useful. When asked about whether online participants are more or less knowledgeable about planning issues, there were a mix of opinions, with 34.4% believing that online participants are more knowledgeable, 34.4 believing in-person participants are more knowledgeable, and 28% believing that the groups are equally knowledgeable. Table 1 presents the responses of administrators to a series of statements about the online participation tools.

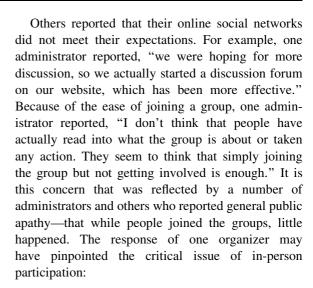**Table 1** Online participation tool influence as reported by group administrators

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Online participation tools allow us to reach individuals who would otherwise not participate	73.1	26.9	0.0% (0)	0.0	0.0
Online participation tools are all that is needed for our community outreach	3.8	3.8	3.8% (1)	46.2	42.3
Online participation tools allow us to enhance the participation experience of our citizens	46.2	50.0	0.0% (0)	3.8	0.0
Online participation tools exclude a significant part of our citizenry	20.0	24.0	32.0% (8)	20.0	4.0
Online participation tools are most useful as a supplement to traditional participation approaches	42.3	46.2	3.8%	3.8	3.8

When asked whether members of the groups attended public meetings on the planning issues, six of the administrators reported that either they or other members of the groups attended public meetings. Two reported that they were not sure if any meetings were attend. Two reported that letters and comment forms were completed and sent to public officials about the planning issue. This result indicates that less than one-quarter of the groups formed by administrators had members attend public meetings. This result echoes what the planning department representatives said in their surveys, which are discussed in the following section.

Administrators were asked to explain how their groups had or had not met their expectations for citizen engagement in the planning process. A number reported about how their groups had exceeded their expectations, providing comments such as "it brought the city together with the party that was going to sell the ski resort and they seemed to reach a compromise". Another administrator commented that "feedback provided is much more collaborative and sophisticated. Not just stating one-off opinions and rants—it's actual dialogue." The comment on the depth of dialogue was echoed by other administrators. Others reported their satisfaction that groups not usually included, such as youth and young adults, became involved and interacted with elected officials. Many reported their satisfaction with raising awareness in their communities about planning issues.

One success story comes from Charleston, South Carolina, where a series of groups formed to oppose the development of a Wal-Mart on a wetlands site on James Island. Sign the Petition: Save Wetlands from Wal-Mart (475 members), Save James Island Wetlands from Walmart (431 members), Stop Wal-Mart Expansion on James Island (396 members) and Islanders for Responsible Expansion (263 members) were all groups focused on stopping Wal-Mart's development. The Sign the Petition group was formed to help get the word out about what was happening. Overall, its administrator believed that, compared to traditional participation formats, they received more input, the input was more useful, the participants were more knowledgeable, and that they attracted largely new participants. The group stopped when there was an announcement that Wal-Mart would not build the project.

Others reported that their online social networks did not meet their expectations. For example, one administrator reported, "we were hoping for more discussion, so we actually started a discussion forum on our website, which has been more effective." Because of the ease of joining a group, one administrator reported, "I don't think that people have actually read into what the group is about or taken any action. They seem to think that simply joining the group but not getting involved is enough." It is this concern that was reflected by a number of administrators and others who reported general public apathy—that while people joined the groups, little happened. The response of one organizer may have pinpointed the critical issue of in-person participation:

> Sometimes people mistake joining a Facebook group as actual action for a cause. I exceeded my goal of Facebook group 'friends' by 12, but fell six people short of my goal of 10 people attending the actual city council meeting. I used Facebook group membership as an indication of interest, then called members who had phone numbers listed on their pages to remind them about the upcoming city council meeting that they could attend and show the council their support for the plan. On the phone many people were excited that they had joined the group, but were hesitant about making a further commitment to attend the meeting. Also, the cause and event my Facebook group was advocating for was very targeted and required members to participate in a specific action (attending the meeting) for me to consider the group successful. However, those who joined the group were located in many different places. In spite of the indication of location within the group title and that I invited only people who were from the Jacksonville area, most members were college students who were not actually residing in the area at the time. Facebook was effective at introducing people to a cause, but was less effective at producing actual support for the cause.

Another organizer reported, "ultimately, I think relying on the Internet for community outreach creates complacency and should not be used as a replacement for person-to-person, real life outreach

strategies." Most administrators reported they they were frustrated that they were able to recruit people to join their groups, but that many members were then not willing to participate in the actions necessary to move causes forward.

Planning department survey results

The surveyed planning department representatives lacked awareness of planning-related Facebook groups. Only two cities were aware of the existence of Facebook groups, and in each case this was because each Facebook group was part of a very organized neighborhood coalition that regularly engaged with the city in discussion of development and planning issues. Because of planning administrator's lack of awareness, they reported that planning-related Facebook groups had no influence or an unknown influence on the planning process. The planners reported that there was no more than usual participation on the planning issues being discussed in the social networking groups organized by the public.

While the groups opposed to development projects or plans were often able to attract hundreds of people to join in their opposition, they were not successful in translating this into public action. For example, more than 400 people in Canfield Township, Ohio joined a group to oppose a proposed Wal-Mart. However, the group has not been effective in converting online opposition into in-person interaction at public hearings on this development issue. Canfield Township has a population of 14,000 people. With 400 people opposing the project online, one might expect substantial public debate about the siting of the Walmart. The Zoning Administrator in Canfield Township noted that the staff was not aware of the Facebook group and that they had had no more participation than usual on this zoning case. This situation was entirely typical, demonstrating that online organizers were not effective in converting online support into onsite action. This can be attributed to two key issues. The first is identity. People want to be associated with causes that they support. Joining a Facebook group opposed to Wal-Mart may support an individual's public image, and it has a low barrier to entry—simply clicking a button to join the group. An individual may be willing to say, "yes, I oppose this project," but may not be willing to take the next step and attend a public hearing about an

issue. More importantly, this may be attributable to the relative naivete of the young people responsible for the creation of the group. They may not understand the planning process, how to effectively engage with the local government on planning issues, or how to have a meaningful impact in the planning process. This provides an important lesson to planners about the importance of educating groups on how to effectively engage in the planning process.

While there was a general lack of knowledge on the part of the planners about planning-related Facebook groups, there were exceptions. The City of Austin regularly interacted with the Responsible Growth for Northcross group, and the result of the interaction was a redesigned site plan for a proposed mall redevelopment project (Evans-Cowley et al. 2010). One planner in the UK reported that while they were aware of a Facebook group, comments posted on the group's site were not monitored, as the city requires that input be provided in person or by letter. On this particular project, the planner reported they had received more than 600 pieces of input but could not specifically attribute it to the Facebook group.

The experience of the planner in the UK described above is not unique. Planners have reported concerns about how to properly treat the input received via social networking sites. What are the public-records implications of using online social networking? The City of Toronto has determined that any comment received via their Facebook group would be treated the same as an e-mail, phone call, or in-person comment. It established a Facebook group for the Jarvis Streetscape Improvement, an important corridor connecting downtown to outer areas of the city, and it included the following privacy statement:

> "Personal information is collected under the City of Toronto Act, Sections 8(1) and 134. Environmental Assessment Act, Part II.1 (Class Environmental Assessments). The information is used for the purpose of accepting comments from the public to study and develop streetscape improvement plans and traffic lane modifications for the Jarvis St. corridor (as noted above). By posting to this page, your names, your postings, and any personal information that you choose to include in your postings are available to the public. If you have any questions about this collection, please contact the Supervisor of Public Consultation,

City of Toronto, 55 John Street, 19th Floor, Toronto ON, M5 V 3C6, 416-392-2990."

Toronto has had success with their Facebook experiment—its Jarvis Streetscape Improvement group attracted 266 members. The public participation planner reported that Facebook was an effective moderator. People were more willing to have discussions in a civil tone in discussion postings, of which there were 61, as compared to comments received via e-mail. The staff believed that because a public presence was involved, people toned down their comments. For example, the public were invited to specify which alternative they preferred, from doing nothing to a combination of alternatives. The discussion focused on the lack of bike lanes in all of the alternative proposals. The group is ongoing as the Jarvis Streetscape project moves forward. People have posted 51 wall postings and 81 links to media discussion and other items about the streetscape project, and the City staff has posted photographs and other materials from the public meetings. The Staff has also posted announcements about public meetings. Twelve members have responded that they would attend one public meeting and 31 have responded that they would attend another public meetings.

Discussion

Online social networking is still fairly immature. The majority of the group administrators surveyed reported that this was their first time creating a group, and very few planners had created social networking groups. As both more members of the public and planners use social networking, and as they learn more about how to be effective in creating groups, online social networks have the potential to become a more successful tool.

The results of this study indicate that while administrators wished to attract more people, they were successful in attracting significant numbers—on average 297 members for public-organized groups. However, administrators reported that it was difficult to translate interest into action. In part, this response may be attributable to identity. Research argues that people will create social relations based on how it will impact their identity (Dalsgaard 2008; Donath and Boyd 2004; Gross and Acquisti 2005; Stutzman

2006; Tufekci 2008; Walther et al. 2008). It appears, based on this study, that identifying with a group opposed to a Wal-Mart or other development is an association that may enhance the members' identities, as the members will be willing to be publically associated with such a group.

Group administrators reported that they reached out primarily to local people in an effort to generate support for their place-based planning efforts. This supports the research that online social connections are largely between people who live locally (Wellman et al. 1996; Horrigan 2001; Horrigan et al. 2001).

Administrators reported that many of their members were people that they knew within their existing networks, but that they were able to attract new people to join their networks. It was unclear if these new members were friends of friends or people completely new to the networks. The result was that existing social ties were strengthened and some new relationships were established is consistent with the literature (Hampton and Wellman 2003; Watters 2003). This study found that the majority of groups were created to oppose a project. This is consistent with other studies that found that when there is a common local problem, people will come together (Foth and Brereton 2004; Hampton 2003).

Some researchers have proposed that online social networks will encourage more face-to-face participation (Ellison et al. 2006; Parks and Floyd; Rheingold 2000). The results of this study indicate that this did not occur. The group administrators had very limited success in attracting people to public meetings and, in one case, it required phone calls to encourage people to attend in person. Largely, online social networking groups did not interact face-to-face.

Donath and Boyd (2004) hypothesize that online social networks may not increase the number of strong ties, but could greatly increase the weak ties one could form and maintain because sites like Facebook are well-suited to maintaining weak ties. In many planning processes, there are loose connections between social network members—for example, there may be a lack of direct links among all the participants (Granovetter 1982). This lack of direct links can increase the efficiency of information flows within a larger network. Members of the social network act as ties to sub-networks, such as individual neighborhood groups. The absence of direct ties

supports the importing and exporting of new information and ideas between the sub-groups (Burt 2000). In most planning situations, planners are looking for "bridging" social capital, which is inclusive and allows for weak connections between individuals who may provide useful information or new perspectives to one another (Putnam 2000). Some researchers argue that the Internet has supplemented off-line interactions with online interactions (Fallows 2004; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). The groups organized meet what researchers identify as critical for group success, that the network is place-based and addresses sociocultural factors (Arnold et al. 2003; Butler 2001; Day and Schuler 2004; Gilchrist 2004; Maloney-Krichmar et al. 2002; Patterson and Kavanaugh 2001; Pinkett 2003; Rheingold 2002).

This study joins other studies of online community networks that were created for place-based initiatives that have had varying degrees of success (Arnold 2003; Carroll and Rosson 2003; Cohill and Kavanaugh 2000; De Cindio et al. 2003; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Meredyth et al. 2004; Pinkett 2003). For planners, this study demonstrates that there are significant challenges in utilizing online social networks.

In order for online social networking to be an effective tool in the planner's participation toolbox, it has to be well designed. The planner cannot simply post a Facebook site and expect people to join it. The group administrators' greatest complaints were that while people joined, they weren't prepared to take action by attending public meetings or being engaged in other ways. This is, in part, an education challenge; group administrators will need to help their members understand the process for affecting change. On the flip side, local governments should evaluate how they collect input and whether input from online social networking groups can become part of a government's dialogue around planning issues.

If one of the goals of social networks is to engage youth, then at least one of the Facebook administrators for a given page could be a high school student. The youth would need to be engaged in the design of the online social network, which would encourage buy in and increase the likelihood that the youth's friends would participate in the planning effort. In a similar way, a planner might choose a group of citizens to assist in the planning effort when organizing other types of stakeholder groups. Some of these stakeholders could be responsible for assisting with the social networking aspect of the participatory problems.

Effective marketing was a challenge that many of the group administrators reported. They mentioned that they were unable to meet their target number of members. Planners need to create titles for their social networking groups that will denote clear and attractive identities. Online social networking groups should be set up to encourage contributions from members, allowing them to post discussions, comments, and other forms of communication. In order to get groups going, it is important to attract a strong base of members. This means reaching out to both regular contacts and more distant contacts. It is possible to invite everyone based on their e-mail addresses. It is important to keep the content fresh so that sites aren't stale. Groups should be open so that anyone can join and view the content. Also, following up with new group members may help to strengthen social ties.

A major concern of the surveyed planners was their lack of access to online social networking sites due to blocks placed by information technology staff. Many agencies prevent their employees from accessing social networking sites. Given the high level of use by the public, there should be protocol discussions with information technology to ensure that planners have access to this tool so that they can effectively reach out to the public.

Another concern is about anonymity. Planners want to be able to identify the individual members of the public who are commenting. While it is possible to create a fake identity on social networking sites, the vast majority of people use their real identities, so this is a relatively minor concern.

Online social networking is just one tool, and the future holds significant promise for it. This study focuses on particular social networking sites, including Facebook and MySpace. As new technologies emerge, new social networking mediums will be adopted. For example, Google Wave offers promise as the next generation of social networking. Other tools may offer further promise for engagement of the public in planning. For example, Foth and Sanders (2008) are exploring opportunities for the intersection of resident engagement and integration of ICT into public spaces, such as allowing residents to leave digital annotations at any location in a city.

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