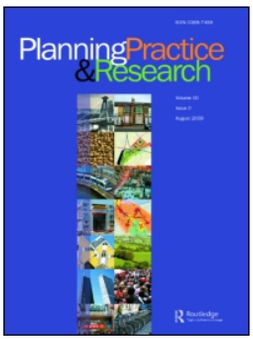

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The New Generation of Public Participation: Internet-based Participation Tools

JENNIFER EVANS-COWLEY & JUSTIN HOLLANDER

Abstract

Since the advocacy planners of the 1960s first brought widespread public participation to the planning process, there have been innovations and improvements. However, the participation practices in the real world, with its face-to-face politics of difference and unequal power relations, are flawed. Today, technology allows for an entirely new generation of forms and practices of public participation that promise to elevate the public discourse in an unprecedented manner while providing an interactive, networked environment for decision-making. This is occurring with asynchronous communities interacting with one another on a variety of planning subjects, which allows for more democratic planning and more meaningful participation. In this paper, we review the ways in which today's web-based virtual worlds, like Facebook and Second Life, provide platforms for public participation in planning in a manner distinct from previous formats. We explore the different ways that citizens and communities are using web-based technologies for citizen participation, including the use of Facebook for community organizing around planning issues and of Second Life for virtual workshops. We include case studies of communities that are using these tools. The paper concludes by exploring the contribution that virtual participation can make to planning and examines the challenges that it poses.

Introduction

As technology has proliferated, it has infiltrated to both the neighborhood scale and the global scale. Jacobs argues that 'word does not move around where public characters and sidewalk life are lacking' (1993, p. 69). In today's world, words are moving rapidly, allowing neighbors to share news that was once passed along on porches or stoops (Blum, 2007). Citizens are increasingly sharing information via social networking and virtual reality tools, rather than from the front porch. For example, while writing this article one of the authors communicated with three neighbors via Facebook[1] to plan a potluck dinner. This article explores the role of virtual tools for engaging citizens in planning processes.

The last US presidential election highlighted the power of social networking in politics. Social networking as a type of 'New Media' is changing the political landscape. Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and YouTube allow individuals to become part of the larger political process through their laptops or personal digital assistants. This has allowed individuals to

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transcend spatial boundaries of the past, creating increased contact and accessibility in every certain domains (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002; Boase *et al*., 2006). For example, hundreds of thousands of people 'friended' Obama and more than a million people logged in to watch his inauguration on Facebook.

People can use social networking sites to watch a presidential debate and ask questions via instant messaging or to participate in real-time polls. They can actively participate in the process rather than just watching what is going on. It is possible to use the sites to organize people for politics, advocacy, or community awareness, all of which are great possibilities for public planning.

Because online social networking and virtual reality tools allow information to spread quickly, it is possible to grow groups to thousands instead of holding a planning meeting for a few dozen people. Citizens may not even realize that they are engaged in a planning process when they 'friend' a planning group on Facebook, but by doing so they are increasing awareness among their network. But it is useful to acknowledge that the movement of planning processes online may not add anything that the in-person meeting for a few dozen people accomplished. One of the aims of this paper is to explore empirically this very question.

Although interactions are increasingly taking place in private spaces at the expense of public spaces (Lofland, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Popenoe, 1985; McPherson *et al*., 2006), there are now new virtual three-dimensional (3D) public spaces available to potentially foster a different type of civic engagement. Among these, the most popular are the platforms created by massively multi-player online games (MMOGs) like Second Life. In Second Life, anyone with a high-speed Internet connection can log-in and join others in a virtual environment that could be a model of their town square, Golden Gate Park, or the Champs Elysees. Because these MMOGs are configured in three dimensions, this Web 2.0 technology allows ordinary citizens to understand and interact with virtual models of the built environment in uniquely 21st-century ways (Beamish 2004; Hollander 2007; Kelton, 2007; Hollander & Thomas, 2009).

Young people's idealism and social networking and gaming environment savvy makes them an attractive target for planners. Facebook has more than 60 million active users, MySpace has more than 110 million active users, YouTube has approximately 60 million users, and Second Life has approximately 15 million users (Owyang, 2008). Users for each application are spread across the globe, but each is vast in its own right. If Facebook was a country, it would be the 24th most populous, with fewer users than persons in the UK and more than in Italy. Joinson's (2008) research helps to explain why people are so drawn to social networking sites: keeping in touch with friends, virtual people watching, re-acquiring lost contacts, and simple communication were identified as the most popular motives for 137 Facebook users who completed an online survey.

This study examines the engagement of cities and their citizens in planning processes with social networking and virtual reality tools. It begins with a review of literature on public participation. This is followed by case studies on the use of Facebook and Second Life in the USA. The article concludes with recommendations for planners about how they can both effectively capture the energy of online planning activists and convert it into traditional mediums of participation and capture planners' energy and convert it to online mediums of participation.

Citizen Participation and Planning

Catells (1996) describes neighborhoods as the nexus of the 'space of places.' Neighborhoods host the home and public streets and community. Participation at the neighborhood level has decreased with the rise of the networked society (Guest & Wierzbicki, 1999; Putnam, 2000). However, information and communications technologies, as part of everyday life, can lead to increased interaction in neighborhoods (Hampton, 2007). People can put up their microphones (Facebook group) or avatars (Second Life) and share with their friends and neighbors what is happening in their communities (Hampton, 2007). These online exchanges may lead to offline contact (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). One study found that local

governments are increasingly designing their websites from the standpoint of 'what does the citizen need to know' versus 'what information do we have to provide,' offering the potential for better engagement (Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2005). However, very few municipal websites facilitate online public dialogue or consultation (Scott, 2006).

Some of the research on citizen participation focuses on why it should be incorporated into planning (Day, 1997). Often-cited benefits of participation include increasing the education and awareness levels of the citizenry, civic engagement, government responsiveness, and citizens' commitment to implementation (for example, Arnstein, 1969; Berry *et al.*, 1993). Participation research provides evidence that when people are involved in decision-making processes, they are more likely to support the implementation of related policies and projects (Potapchuk, 1996). Participation helps to build social capital in a community, which in turn strengthens the community (Potapchuk & Crocker Jr, 1999). Government entities also note less hostility from citizens and better policies from the partnership when there is a high level of participation (Berry *et al*., 1993). Warriner *et al.* claim that 'public participation has become formalized, institutionalized, and some would claim, sterilized' (1996, p. 254).

Not all participation opportunities are equal, however. The literature includes an assessment of the level at which 'the citizens who choose to participate have the opportunity to determine the final policy outcome by means of the participation process' (Berry *et al*., 1993, p. 55). As first elucidated by Arnstein (1969), in essence, participation assessment reflects the level of control afforded participants, ranging from information-based or feedback-only options to interactive participant self-determination. The highest level of participation opportunities hold that all citizens must be equally empowered and fully informed to ensure that they can exert influence on decisions that affect them (Innes, 1996). These opportunities ensure that government decisions are justifiable to each participant, regardless of their social, cultural, and economic circumstances. Programs that lack depth lead to 'token participation.' They tend to emphasize simple, one-way forms of communication that merely educate citizens to accept decisions that have already been made.

Institutionalization of the participation process, as found in traditional public meetings, limits the time and extent to which an individual can learn about a complex public issue. As a result, participation in this environment has become less meaningful and less effective than it could be as either an information exchange or a learning venue. As a result, planners are increasingly looking for new techniques to best engage citizens in planning, including online techniques.

While new methods of public participation develop, it can be a challenge to imbed these new methods into old institutions (Innes, 2005). For example, citizens can participate in social networking to voice their opinions, but the public hearing is the legal instrument of decision-making. If citizens do not provide letters in writing or appear at a public hearing, their opinion may not be heard.

The citizen participation literature includes examples of technological methods that have been incorporated to improve the participation process. Generally, Weber *et al*. find that 'participation on the Internet exerts a positive influence on political participation, even independent of civic participation' (2003, p. 39). Conroy and Gordon (2004) found that technology-based approaches to public meetings can lead to greater knowledge, commitment, and satisfaction levels than traditional public meetings. However, where planners attempt to provide more depth to the participatory process, this can backfire. One issue is the degree of acceptance of the validity of the citizen interface with the technology—Padgett noted that technically savvy citizens may welcome a GIS tool, but 'those less knowledgeable will be difficult to convince' (Padgett, 1993, p. 516). In a California city, Innes (2005) found citizens accused the planners of using more sophisticated methods to manipulate them. In part, the rate of utilization and willingness to accept new methods may be based on the demographics of a community (Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006). In some communities, there is a growing expectation on the part of citizens that there will be online participation opportunities (Evans-Cowley & Conroy, 2006).

Simons notes that 'the degree to which information is truly usable by the public, and consequently, the degree to which participation is possible, may well be a result of *how* that information was presented' (1987, p. 9). An active participatory environment that uses Internet technology has the potential to engage the public, and may therefore facilitate knowledge retention and use by the public. Simons noted further that visually prominent and summary-based information, such as maps and pictures, are participants' preferred forms of information. Visual information, therefore, can become a common language for participants (Al-Kodmany, 1999). In addition, a virtual 3D environment can be of critical importance in physical planning processes, providing a space for participants to interact with each other and to gain new insights into proposed new development or urban design guidelines. Nitsche (2009) charted new theoretical territory by arguing that virtual spaces in MMOGs and video games provide new avenues for comprehending physical environments—potentially adding further evidence to how transformative such applications may be for public participation in planning.

Research in the area of online citizen participation highlights the promise of the collection of information and technology tools to enhance the public participation experience. Furthermore, the planning process provides a forum for realizing the ideals of participatory democracy as a means for democratic discourse (Innes, 1996).

Results of Social Networking

With the rise of social networking sites, a first step of identifying social networking groups focusing on planning issues in the USA was undertaken. To conduct this exploratory research, keyword searches were used, including the terms *comprehensive plan*, *neighborhood planning*, *master plan*, *community plan*, *development plan*, *zoning*, *no development*, *stop development*, and *new development*. Additionally, groups were searched, including Geography—Cities, Geography—Neighborhood, and Organizations—Community Organizations, all followed by a search term. The social networking sites BlackPlanet, Facebook, and MySpace were searched using the above method.

As the searches revealed appropriate groups, each was documented by noting the social networking site, whether it was citizen or government initiated the name of the group, its location, the number of members, and the extent of the use of the available features on the social networking site. The searches resulted in 42 different social networking groups related to planning, primarily on Facebook. This represented all English language groups that were discovered using the listed keyword search method. The public-initiated groups were typically focused on a neighborhood-level or site-level planning issue and tended to be opposed to the project, while the government-initiated groups tended to focus at a neighborhood, community or regional scale around a particular planning process, such as creating a comprehensive plan.

After the 42 different social networking groups were identified, each of the administrators for the groups was contacted and asked to complete a survey regarding their group. The survey was sent via Facebook or by email where an email address was provided on the Facebook group. The survey invited the group administrators to complete a survey about their group and its engagement in the planning process. 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.

Eleven group administrators responded (26%). In addition, for each citizen-initiated group, the local government planning department was contacted to determine the extent to

which the group has influenced the planning process. The information collected was utilized to better understand the typical uses of Facebook for planning. After examining the 11 groups where survey responses were provided, two case studies were selected to illustrate the use of Facebook—the first a government-initiated group and the second a citizen-initiated group. These cases studies were selected as best case examples of how governments and the public are using Facebook.

Government-initiated Social Network—Aspen, Colorado

The vast majority of social networking sites focusing on planning issues were citizen initiated (86%), while six were initiated by local governments for a planning process. There are interesting differences between the two types of groups. The government-initiated sites had, on average, just 29 'friends,' while the citizen-initiated sites had an average of 297 'friends.' The City of Aspen, Colorado initiated a Facebook group in October 2008 as part of its Aspen Area Community Plan update. The City decided to use Facebook for the first time to try to get the word about its community plan update out to a younger demographic, including high school students and young professionals. The City used their website and word of mouth to try to attract 'friends.' City staff also went to the high school to collect input and encourage these students to join the Facebook group and participate on the City's blog. The use of Facebook has attracted a limited number of people—52 including staff members—but this met the goal of making 50 'friends.' To put this in perspective, the City/County is hosting large public meetings as part of the process, and the goal is to have more than 1, 000 people attend these meetings.

The Aspen Facebook group has been used to post information about upcoming citizen meetings. Links have been provided to the City's plan website (http://www.aspencommunityvision.com) to allow people to register to attend small group meetings about the plan. The group also announced and linked to the Community Plan blog, which started in November 2008. The blog had generated 59 comments in 3 months. The City has utilized a limited number of features, primarily focusing on using the group to notify citizens of upcoming events. Effectively, the City has used Facebook as just one piece of a larger citizen participation process. For example, the City offered a 'Meeting-in-a-Box' kit that allowed citizens to host their own meetings. The kit included 10 colored cards on 10 topics, a document on how to build your vision, pens and notepads, and popcorn.

The Aspen Facebook group has had limited success. The City did not expect to get a great deal of participation on Facebook, given that Aspen's average age is almost 50, but staff reported that they have been pleasantly surprised by the amount of interest and involvement. The Facebook group has helped to let people know about upcoming events and to share information, but it has not been effective in gaining input. The City reports that they received much more information from traditional input than from the Facebook group. The City has been effective in convincing almost all of the members participating online to also participate in the traditional public process. The City believes that traditional input is somewhat more useful than online input resources, and that traditional participants are more knowledgeable and engaged than online participants. However, the City did report that the online participants are largely new, rather than the same people who regularly participate in onsite events, and that online tools have allowed them to reach individuals who might otherwise not participate. Although the use of the online participation tools allowed the City to enhance the participation experience for their citizens, it believes that online participation tools are most useful as a supplement to traditional participation approaches.

Citizen-initiated Social Network—Austin, Texas

Citizen-initiated groups dominate in social networking sites focusing on planning issues. Most citizen-initiated groups are organized to oppose a development proposal or plan (80%). These groups are often able to attract hundreds of 'friends' to join their cause in opposing a project. For example, more than 400 people joined a Facebook group called 'No F*cking Walmart in Canfield.' However, these large groups have not been effective in converting

their online opposition into participation through formal planning processes. For example, Canfield Township, Ohio has a modest population of 14, 000 people, and with 400 people opposed to a project one might think that this significant level of online participation would translate into onsite participation. However, the township Zoning Inspector reported that the township staff were not aware that the Facebook group existed and reported that they had no more participation than usual in this particular zoning case. This situation was entirely typical, showing that online organizers were not effective in participating in formal planning processes.

This was not the case in Austin, Texas. A developer originally proposed to demolish the Northcross Mall and replace it with a 217, 000-square-foot Wal-Mart Superstore with a three-storey parking garage and additional outbuildings. This resulted in a significant amount of online debate. In Austin, three Facebook groups were created in opposition to development in the Northcross area of the city: 'Austin Against Walmart' (72 members), 'Walmart isn't weird' (43 members), and 'Those Against Building a Wal-Mart Where Our Beloved Northcross Mall Stands' (291 members). There is also a competing group, 'who cares about northcross mall?? Build the freakin walmart already!!,' with 23 members.

On the pro-development side, 'who cares about northcross mall?? Build the freakin walmart already!!' is made up of primarily college students. A wall posting from a group member presents the general idea of the group:

> Yeah, I'm soooo sad all the mom and pop stores like Bealls, Oshman's, Ritz Camera, Guitar Center, Sunglass Hut, Claire's and Hallmark Gold Crown will go out of business … boooo f*cking hooo … bring on the wal … have you guys heard about the proposed wal-mart, it will be one for the ages, so much better than any we have so far, with like a sushi bar and all this sweet new-age stuff … can't wait.

The group 'Walmart isn't weird' argue that Austin is known for its uniqueness and that citizens must 'preserve the color of our city, and turn our backs to those who threaten to bring us down to dull, grey, conformity.' The members of this group are primarily high school students.

The group 'Those Against Building a Wal-Mart Where Our Beloved Northcross Mall Stands' is made up of a mix of people, from high school students to adults. This group is an off-shoot of a larger organization called 'Responsible Growth for Northcross' (RG4N), a neighborhood group that represents people who live or own businesses in the Northcross Mall area (http://www.rg4n.org). This Facebook group encouraged people to sign a petition opposing the proposed Wal-Mart in their neighborhood and to visit a website about the initiative. The group provided informational links, an active discussion board, wall posts, and a photograph of the mall.

The group 'Austin Against Wal-Mart' is the most sophisticated of the groups. It has an affiliation with the RG4N organization. The administrator started the group a month after Walmart announced its plans to move the supercenter into the Northcross neighborhood because she wanted to get students involved in city planning. She is an experienced group user, having created more than five Facebook groups in the past. She got the word out by inviting her existing Facebook friends to join the group and by letting the 'City of Austin Against Walmart' group know about her group. However, only 72 people from this group joined 'Against Austin Wal-Mart' group. The group anticipates that their target audience was either not aware of or familiar with Facebook, but the administrator anticipates that usership would increase in larger urban settings with a higher number of young working professionals.

The administrator of the 'Against Austin Wal-Mart' group primarily wanted to get information out to people about what was going on with the development project. Her Facebook group provided a link in English and Spanish to a survey about the redevelopment plan, a link to the RG4N website, and a link about telling the city council to suspend the site plan for the proposed Wal-Mart. The administrator believes that citizens receive more information from traditional input than from online input, but she thinks that the usefulness of the input is the same regardless of whether it is online or

traditional. She also believes that traditional participants are more knowledgeable and more engaged than online participants. She was able to generate new participants with her Facebook group, but some of the same people who were online had also attended past traditional meeting formats. However, she does believe that she was able to reach people through Facebook that otherwise would not have participated. She strongly disagrees that online tools are all that is needed to do community outreach, but she believes that online tools enhance the participation experience for citizens. Also, she believes that they are best used as a supplement to traditional participation tools.

The City of Austin reports that it was not aware of the Wal-Mart Facebook groups, but it was familiar with the RG4N group. The responding staff member spoke with RG4N on a regular basis. The Northcross Mall development project had significantly higher levels of participation than other projects. The City believes that social networking participants are probably less knowledgeable about planning issues based on a review of the Facebook groups. The City staff member was not surprised to learn that there were Facebook groups related to the project. He reported that RG4N used a slew of methods to raise awareness, including massive telephone banking, petition drives at local retail stores and theaters, and protests. The staff member was not aware of any Facebook group that has had a particular impact on policy matters in Austin. He points out that Austin has always had a fairly active citizenry, even prior to the implementation of most technologies (Levinski, 2008).

While the City may not have been aware of any of the Facebook groups, the significant impact of RG4N did influence the planning process. Facebook served as a small piece of an overall outreach strategy. The City initially approved an original site plan, but the developer pursued a second site plan in 2007. In June 2008, the City of Austin approved a second site plan for Northcross Mall. Later that month, RG4N filed a lawsuit to invalidate the site plan. In August, the developer came back with a third revised proposal for a 99, 000-square-foot Wal-Mart with one storey and no parking garage or gas station. The plan includes enhanced design, with additional landscaping and the addition of more sidewalks. After meeting with RG4N, the developer went to the City to pursue approval of the new site plan. In December 2008, the Austin City Council passed a big box ordinance. In December, construction on the site was voluntarily suspended for 60 days to gather input from surrounding neighborhoods. At the date of this writing, no final proposal had been approved. The Austin Chronicle declared RG4N as the 'Best of Austin,' noting that 'The heroes of RG4N are standing up not just for their own neighborhood but for a whole city' (RG4N, 2008).

Results of Second Life

To examine how Second Life aids or detracts from public participation in planning, we examined two examples in the Boston, Massachusetts metropolitan area. For each example, we present some background information on why Second Life was utilized, describe its use, and present our analysis of how Second Life impacted on the public process undertaken.[2]

Hub2—Boston, Massachusetts

In 2007, faculty and students at Emerson College, a small private college in Boston, developed a partnership with the City of Boston to experiment with using Second Life to engage citizens in urban planning (Gordon & Koo, 2008). The project, dubbed Hub2, was intended to support technological innovation in governance and fit the interests of media studies students at Emerson. Specifically, the City of Boston sought to use Second Life 'to enable local neighborhoods to participate more meaningfully in the design and development of their own public spaces' (Hub2, 2009). The project directors developed a guided curriculum that was provided to a small group of community activists and city employees in small in-person workshop settings.

Using a framework they developed called IDEA (Imagine, Design, Engage, and Activate), the project directors facilitated community members through a four-step process to explore, understand, and contribute to the design of a variety of spaces throughout the city (Gordon &

Koo, 2008). For each space, participants first went to the real-world location and *imagined* the possibilities of the space through a direct observation research approach. Next, they *imagined* the space within Second Life through a virtual exploration. Following that, each participant re-*designed* the space based on their imagining exercises and *engaged* with other avatars in the space to test the space's usability and esthetic qualities. The designs were primarily of city parks and other open space areas where participants manipulated street furniture and plantings, and then registered their approval or disapproval of others' work with the placement of flags. Lastly, participants *activated* their spaces by bringing their work back into the real world through videos, posters, and, finally, an oral presentation to the Mayor's office.

The Hub2 project was not a sustained, open public planning process, but an experiment in mixing virtual and real interactions when considering city spaces. While much can be learned from such an endeavor, since it lacked any actual public planning objectives its success is hard to assess. Rather, we argue that the Hub2 experiment illustrates the potential to invent new forms of public interaction with urban design and planning. In many ways, the Hub2 team created new rules in their IDEA framework simply because the traditional rules for public participation in planning have little relevance when asynchronous interaction in 3D computer-generated spaces is possible in real time.

Master Planning in Acton, Massachusetts

The second example of the use of Second Life in a planning process was initiated by faculty and students at Tufts University, a large private research university, in concert with local officials in the Town of Acton, a 20, 000-person growing suburban community 20 miles west of Boston. Acton has experienced growth rates of between 5% and 10% every decade since 1970 and has been ineffective at managing the influx of new residents (US Census, 2000). In 2007, the town commenced a new master planning process aimed at rethinking growth management and developing physical planning and design strategies to address new growth. In the interest of trying to make this plan most comprehensible to a lay audience, local officials sought out a tool to aid them in computer visualization of various growth scenarios. The Tufts-Acton team together agreed to use Second Life in an experimental way to accomplish these visualization goals.

The team began by selecting a key neighborhood in Acton called Kelley's Corner, which has developed at a low to medium density and could experience greater development in future years. The site is also a major gateway to the town and is located within walking distance of the town's only high school. The Tufts team developed a 3D model of Kelley's Corner in Second Life and, working closely with Acton officials, designed a series of mechanisms to allow local residents to engage both synchronously and asynchronously with the virtual environment.

This effort is ongoing and we can only report preliminary findings. Just as in the Hub2 project, technical difficulties and the need to control access to only local residents limited the team's expansion of the project to off-site users. Computer terminals loaded with Second Life were installed in public libraries and at a series of workshop locations, but few users logged in remotely due to technical hurdles. This limitation severely restricted the number of users who were able to participate in the project, essentially invalidating one of the key rationales behind the project. In total, approximately 75 Acton residents logged onto the virtual space and participated in the planning exercise. For those participants who connected to the site, informal observations by one of the authors suggest that their experiences were largely meaningful and provocative. Participants who were involved in the Kelley's Corner location found ample opportunities to interact with others in the virtual space and provide feedback to the Tufts-Acton team about ways the neighborhood could increase in density.

Discussion

Blum (2007) argues that social networking sites have the opportunity to feed off neighborhoods and *vice versa* in order to more fully connect neighbors. He argues that social networking can offer the social benefits and local ties of living in a medium-density neighborhood to those living

in high-density neighborhoods. These benefits are hypothetical, and the extension of this concept to connecting neighbors to their local government is still in its infancy.

The Facebook and Second Life examples show that social networking online works best as part of a broader participatory process. As one respondent to the Facebook administrator survey stated:

> Sometimes people mistake joining a Facebook group as actual action for a cause ... On the phone many people were excited that they had joined the group, but were hesitant about making a further commitment to attend the [City Council] meeting. Also, the cause and event the 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 only people who were from the Jacksonville area were invited, 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.

While Facebook is popular with millions of users, and in some ways it appears to be an ideal tool for engaging citizens in planning processes, it is important to recognize how citizens view what 'friending' means on Facebook. For the moment, Facebook appears to be effective in helping citizens gain knowledge about planning processes and projects. That said, Facebook should be used as one part of a larger group of participatory techniques.

Likewise, the Hub2 project was conducted outside a formal planning process—thus detracting from the potential for it to be a unifying social and political force. Whereby, the Acton project was part of a larger planning process and highlights the utility of gathering residents together, electronically, to interact, debate, and discuss their community's future. In contrast to Facebook, Second Life brings residents together in a 3D virtual space and this offered new and novel ways for planners to engage with residents.

One reason for the slow adoption of social networking sites by local governments may be because of their limitations on the ability of their employees to use Facebook or Second Life. For example, while Toronto has numerous citizen-initiated Facebook planning groups, employees of the city are banned from using Facebook. However, the City Councilors are still permitted to use Facebook so they can use it as a communications tool with constituents (Gray, 2007). One Borough in London, England has done the same thing, banning two-thirds of its employees from using Facebook (Malkin, 2007). Many cities might also ban the use of virtual environments, such as Second Life, in the workplace, viewing them as games rather than work.

While the Facebook example shows how useful remote participation can be, the Second Life examples illustrate just how high the technological hurdles are for mass participation remotely. In Acton, a town of 20, 000 residents, extensive outreach by university and town officials could only attract less than 100 participants. The power of the web-based applications described here is that people can be involved remotely, yet the challenges of using high-tech software can be a challenge to implementation.

Conclusion

Public participation has been a hallmark of the planning process for over 30 years, with each generation trying to improve access and interactivity to ordinary citizens. However, as we launch into the second decade of the 21st century, the increasing pervasiveness of high-speed Internet access and the proliferation of social networking and MMOG tools have meant that new forms and processes of public participation can truly change the way planning works.

As the cases in this paper illustrate, this newfound power to democratize planning processes is not absolute and must be approached

with caution. Our findings suggest that the Internet may be more useful for some forms of public participation than others. The case studies on Facebook illustrated the need to connect in-person and online participation to effect change. In some cases, the kind of hybrid, in-person and online experiences experimented with on Second Life could effectively complement the kind of ongoing connections and 'friendships' sustained through Facebook. Such new and creative participation strategies could ameliorate the potential harmful effects of an increasing digital divide. As the poorest members of society are in some cases shut out of high-speed web access, their presence in regular, ongoing, online social networking will only be limited. At the same time, the ability of projects like Hub2 and the Tufts-Acton initiative provide physical, place-based forums where the most digitally disenfranchised can access web technologies and become involved in an unprecedented way.

We started this article discussing the potential of information and communications technologies in planning. This research has found that there is limited use of these new technologies to engage in planning. In part this may be a result of the technology being new, or in part because planners have not yet learned how to effectively use this technology in planning processes. As the public popularity of social networking and MMOGs increases, planners should be prepared to engage the public in mediums that the public is already using. The potential is still there, but planners need to act to embrace these technologies and learn to be effective in using them. This is why Devisch (2008) argues for planners to use tools like Second Life as part of their engagement toolkit.

We encourage other scholars to pursue further research on the so-called 'digital divide' between those with and without high-speed Internet access and to explore the implications of the divide for just planning processes. Researchers have argued that inclusiveness is critical to a truly participatory planning process (Baker *et al*., 2007; Brownhill & Carpenter, 2007). We also suggest more research on the basic effectiveness and efficiency of these new Internet-based tools to generate meaningful public engagement in planning processes—we need to have stronger empirical evidence of what really works, what does not, who is included, who is left behind, and how the future of planning will grapple with the persistent problems of unequal power relations both online and offline. Kitchen and Whitney (2004) found that planners are eager to find solutions and work on issues of equality in access and to find ways to engage with hard-to-reach groups. It is with optimism that we see technology playing a role and one more opportunity to engage with the public.

Notes

1. Facebook is a free social networking website that allows users to add friends, send them messages, post updates about themselves, share photographs, links and videos, and participate in groups.
2. The methods employed here consist of participant observation, interviews, and review of published and unpublished documents from June 2008 through November 2009 for the two Second Life projects described below.

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