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“Hampstead Community Dialogue”: Small Town Norms in an Online Forum

“Hampstead Community Dialogue”¹ is a Facebook group created to facilitate interaction between citizens and politicians in the town of Hampstead, Quebec, Canada. Hampstead is a small and entirely residential suburban town enclaved by the city of Montreal. The Hampstead Facebook group was founded by three town councillors in November 2020 during the COVID pandemic and in the run-up of a municipal election year. Their stated goal was to foster more open communication between themselves and town residents by providing an publicly visible alternative to email. The councillors and members of their family remain the administrators and only official moderators of the group to this day. The group is entirely open to the public. Anyone can post or comment, all posts are publicly viewable, and there is no vetting to join the group. Explicit rules are minimal and demand only no spam posts and to remain kind. Hampstead Community Dialogue is not officially tied to the town of Hampstead, with the town maintaining a separate official Facebook profile.

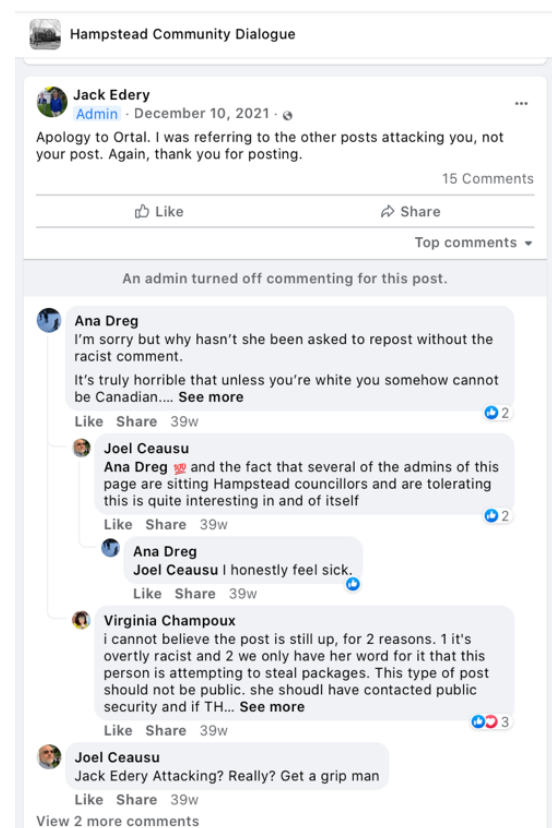
Despite its unofficial nature, the group continues to grow, totalling 544 members with three joining in the week preceding this report. If it was assumed that all 544 members are residents of Hampstead, they would represent roughly 7.7% of the town’s population according to the 2021 Canadian census. New posts are created at a rate of a little under one a day. Judging by the profile pictures of the posters, nearly all seem to be at least in their thirties or older. Posting generally remains true to the admins’ intent and focuses on town governance, quality of life issues and even some planning and policy decisions. For example, traffic control, garbage pickup, public works, safety, and one man’s crusade to get pickleball courts in the town park have become top points for discussion. These posts generate the most interaction in the form of reactions and comments with the town councillor admins often responding. The councillors’ comments offer explanations and assistance to residents’ queries as they see fit. Other town employees respond to resident inquiries as well, though they are not group admins. Some residents have also used the group in a more social capacity, such as soliciting recommendations

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/hampsteaddialogue/>

or promoting events, though this use is less frequent. This tendency of the content focusing more on day-to-day local issues and inquiries as supposed to socializing has led to the group becoming a civic forum and a focal point of citizen-government interaction for the town.

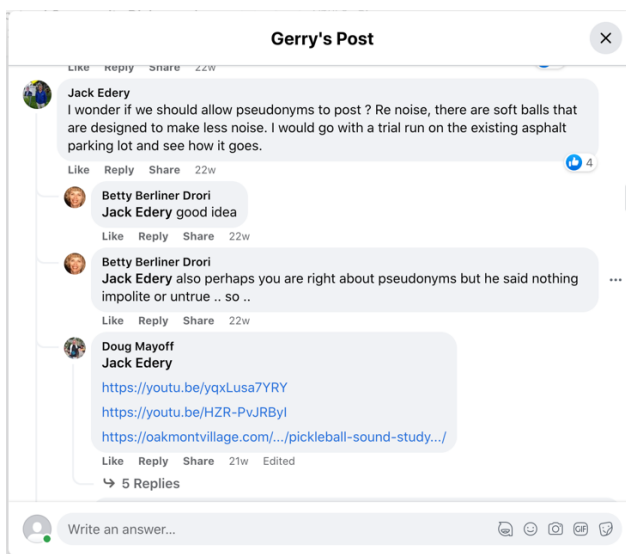
The sparse rules of the group allow citizens room to dictate norms. While content in the group focuses on civic issues, it is not restricted to them, and users will not have their socially oriented posts removed. It is the users' commitments to keeping the group a forum for civic issues and their continuous posting of that content that keeps it a forum for civic issues. The tone of posts also falls in line with user driven expectations. If users see posts which they deem inappropriate they will openly call for the admins to remove them. The public and "irreversible" nature of posting in Facebook groups also makes people choose their wording and content carefully. While this may discourage dissent, it can also hold the politician admins to account as they must put thought into their public responses whereas before private email was the sole form of communication.

A drawback to having few rules is that there is no rigid framework for the admins to follow. Admins could potentially restrict or remove posts that they personally disagree with. Facebook leaves no trace if such an act were done. The admins may also not respond fast enough on public demands for policing the group and erode user trust. Tension can also arise from the admins' dual roles as acting politicians. This can impede their ability to remain neutral. The admins have used the group as a place to campaign for themselves, as well as against the now-former mayor, in the last municipal election in 2021. The featured posts of the Facebook group are evidence of this with all of them relating to election issues and the admins' campaigns. There were allegations that the former mayor and the candidates he supported were blocked from joining the group. The de facto private ownership of the space and the biases of the owners will always be a looming concern to the users' abilities to keep discussion free and open.



The group's open access and the presence of elected officials lends to its ability to attract residents of all backgrounds. Both single-family homeowners and renters, a near half-half split in the town's population in the physical world², voice their concerns and hold the council member admins to account. The group is not advertised as exclusionary to any group. Homeowners have used the space to draw attention to poor snow and ice clearance in the winter, while renters, with the strong backing of the councillors, organized and opposed a plan to redevelop a row of low-rise apartments into upscale condos. This open access can also allow for pseudo-anonymity as a way to circumvent the public nature of Facebook.

Anonymous posting is a built-in feature of Facebook and is available in the Hampstead Community group, but all anonymous posts must be approved by admins. This effectively denies users lateral when they want to use the feature as they must maintain the same decorum as posting publicly if they want their post approved. One of the few truly anonymous posts was a complaint about noisy dogs on a particular street where the complainant presumably wanted discretion. Due to the Hampstead group's lack of vetting, users can get around the anonymous post review and create alternate accounts. This has not caused a collapse of order in the group and posts under these pseudonyms also remain few. One cleverly named account, "Gerry Attrics", seems to have been created solely to make a dissenting post in the course of the aforementioned pickleball court debate. Though the admins and some users are weary of the lack of accountability when using pseudonyms, they seem to be tolerated as long as the posts remain respectful and on topic. Overall, anonymous and pseudonymous posting are possible, though



rare, and not necessarily looked upon very highly by the group's leaders and some of its users.

The most apparent improvement that could be made to Hampstead Community Dialogue is reform to its formal management. The Facebook group has grown into a town institution with the potential to outlast any of the current councillors' terms in office. As such, the councillors could surrender their

² See the 2021 Canadian Census for Hampstead.

administration of the group to town employees, some of whom are already members of the group, or to some other more impartial third party. The councillors, after forfeiting their control of the group, and their future successors should remain a permanent fixture of the forum as their presence is core to driving citizen-government interaction. A change like this can ensure that the next time politics arises all sides can be more fairly heard and gives those evaluating anonymity and dissent no stake in what is being said. A more definitive stance should further be taken toward anonymity and pseudonymity, in particular if and when they should be allowed. Perhaps anonymous posts regarding partisan election politics could be banned while posts about current policy gripes allowed. Even further, all anonymous posts could be approved in all cases as long as they remain on topic and do not incite harassment or misinformation. Changes like these could allow for dissent without fear of retaliation while minimizing acts of bad faith.

Hampstead Community Dialogue generally succeeds in its role. It provides a mostly open platform for citizens of a small town to communicate with their elected officials and raise attention to the local issues most important to them. The group's content emerged from both its user's establishing norms and the admin's enforcing their will. Planning actions have been achieved through the group, from the blocking of the upscale condo redevelopment to prompting investigations into stop sign and speed bump placement. Shortcomings do remain in the glaring conflict of interest of the group administrators, the ability for the lack of rules to be turned against users by those administrators, and the de facto absence of anonymity. The closed nature of the group's management lends credence to Noveck's belief that true public space does not exist online. But the uses the citizens of Hampstead have found for the group go beyond using the internet as a government service delivery system or "brochure-ware" as Noveck put it. Residents use the group for input in the running of the town. They have developed a communal view of this private public digital space and appreciate the accountability it creates for Hampstead. If the group is to continue to grow and remain true to its founding goal, its management should evolve to fit community expectations.

Bibliography

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