

# Facebook as a Site of Public Deliberation on Local Sustainability Policy

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## ABSTRACT

Can Facebook, a hugely popular social media website, cultivate dialogue and deliberation among diverse participants of a government-hosted public engagement effort on complex policy issues? My upcoming masters of arts research project will design, implement and analyze a Facebook-based public discussion to engage Vancouver-area residents and stakeholders in policy discussions about the City of Vancouver Transportation Plan update. Investigation results will offer new insight into the desirability and feasibility – from both citizen and government perspectives – of social online interactions in a government's policy development process. This research is part of a University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University research partnership titled Greenest City Conversations, an innovative, interdisciplinary and large-scale research project aimed at testing multiple channels for public engagement on sustainability policies. Project partners are Pacific Institute for Climate Studies (PICS), BC Hydro, MetroQuest, GRAND NCE and the City of Vancouver. Research will be conducted in May-June 2011.

## Author Keywords

Social media, sustainability, information communication technologies, social mobilization, local government, government 2.0.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI).

## INTRODUCTION

All levels of government in democratic countries around the globe are considering the role of social media in their relationship with citizens. Tentative adopters are signing up for services such as Twitter, Facebook and hosting blogs to push messages out to the public, replicating traditional one-way communication. Some government agencies and administrations have taken a bolder approach, utilizing the

many-to-many nature of social media in order to listen and exchange ideas with their citizens – leading examples include the Federal US Obama Administration, the City of Manor, Texas, and the City of Melbourne, Australia.

The City of Vancouver has recently joined the ranks of government innovators through its recent use of social media as a public engagement tool. Its Greenest City initiative ([talkgreentous.ca](http://talkgreentous.ca) and [talkgreenvancouver.ca](http://talkgreenvancouver.ca)) used Facebook, Twitter, online crowdstorming and YouTube to engage residents and stakeholders on sustainability planning conversations. Thousands of people participated in these online efforts, resulting in new ideas and a public constituency with increased awareness of the project.

In partnership with the City of Vancouver Engineering Department, this research project will design, host and analyze an innovative Facebook-based public engagement exercise for the Transportation Plan update. Over five weeks, participants will convene in Facebook for (a) small group private discussions, followed by (b) a period of public sharing and voting for the best ideas that emerged. The project begins in early May 2011.

Key research questions are: (a) can a Facebook based public engagement project foster dialogue and deliberation on complex and controversial policies, and, (b) does participation impact subjects' perceptions of sustainability and related policies?

Results will include public perspectives on Vancouver transportation-related issues (demographically analyzed), public-generated ideas about the Transportation Plan, and greater insight into the desirability and feasibility of social online interactions in a government's policy development process. Research is led by Susanna Haas Lyons, a masters student at UBC and experienced public engagement practitioner; Dr. John Robinson (UBC) is the Primary Investigator and Dr. Alexandra Samuel (Emily Carr) is a research supervisor.

This research is being conducted as a part of the Greenest City Conversations Project – a two-year public engagement action research partnership among UBC, Simon Fraser University, Pacific Institute for Climate Studies (PICS), BC Hydro, MetroQuest, GRAND NCE and the City of Vancouver.

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## **SUSTAINABILITY**

The definition of sustainability is highly contested. A popular notion of sustainability integrates three themes of environment, society, economy in a way that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN 1987). However, there are dozens of definitions of sustainability. Matutinovic (2007) observes that the variety of sustainability definitions proves not only that it is an inconclusive term, but also that there is disagreement on the desired scope of change as well as the effects we are attempting to mitigate or avoid. Robinson (2004) contends that the term's vagueness is actual an advantage in the context of participatory process, where it becomes 'constructive ambiguity' for exploring the normative nature of sustainability.

## **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN SUSTAINABILITY POLICY**

Public expectations for their involvement in government decision-making is on the rise, especially on issues of the environment (Bulkeley & Mol, 2003; Beierle & Cayford, 2002; Depoe, Delicath & Elsenbeer, 2004). This desire is partially a response to a growing sense of skepticism among citizens with regard to the sufficiency of scientific expertise and its use in decision-making (Bäckstrand, 2003). Numerous studies, particularly in land use research and planning, highlight the inability of scientific information alone to transform policy outcomes (Talwar, Wiek & Robinson, 2010). Therefore, the public and stakeholder groups must be involved in defining the issues, exploring options, and advancing solutions to the problems of climate change and other sustainability challenges (Bizikova et al, 2009).

## **PARTICIPATORY TECHNOLOGIES**

Digital media products and almost ubiquitous access technology are rapidly changing the way activists, policy makers, businesses, governments and citizens are communicating, collaborating, and acting (Levine et. al, 2001; Garret, 2006). Early stages of digital media replicated the broadcast method of communication, characterised by one-to-many communication, low levels of interactivity, small numbers of producers, and universal messaging. Email and bulletin boards of that era were harbingers of the expanding role of users as content producers. Today, digital media is partially defined by its interactive quality, the user's "ability to directly intervene in and change the images and texts that they access" so that "the audience for new media becomes a 'user' rather than the 'viewer,'" (Lister et. al, 2009, p. 20-21).

Online public engagement techniques may present a solution to deliberative democracy's challenges of scale, geography and the limited amount of time participants are willing to allocate to a project. Online discussions may also be less expensive than traditional engagement processes, although the costs of outreach are often significant. A major

potential tradeoff is that, unlike face-to-face processes that often last an hour or more, online processes can be very brief, ranging from seconds to minutes of interaction.

## **RESEARCH PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

My master of arts research project is being conducted in partnership with the City of Vancouver. A public discussion on green mobility and active transportation will be held in Facebook. The outcomes will inform the City of Vancouver's upcoming plans and policies. The City of Vancouver is developing action plans around its goals to become the Greenest City in the world by 2020, and will be renewing its transportation plan in spring 2011.

## **Topic for Dialogue and Deliberation**

Participant discussion will focus on the Transportation Plan update and the Greenest City target of taking the majority of Vancouver trips on foot, bicycle, and public transit. The topic of active mobility is an especially interesting topic due to both its centrality in sustainably-oriented city planning as well as its divisive local history. As well, psychological tension between the individual benefit of driving and the collective benefit of active or public transportation choices is emblematic of the struggles faced in taking steps towards a sustainable future. A well designed online dialogue and deliberation may help build greater public tolerance of the various perspectives and provide insight on public values to help guide City action.

## **Engagement Method**

Facebook will be the site of the public engagement project. A new Facebook application (app) is under development that hosts both small and large group discussion as well as individual voting. The engagement event will feature (as of March 1, 2011):

1. Pre-event information and consent.
2. Moderated small group dialogues focused on a shared task. Groups will be assigned for maximum diversity.
3. Background information on the topic will be featured and experts will be available for Q&A to those groups.
4. Public discussion and voting on ideas submitted by the small groups.
5. Short surveys to measure participant views.

The project's emphasis on dialogue and ongoing participation will differentiate the application from existing uses of social media, including blogs and commenting on news sites, to explore complex policy issues. Additionally, the moderated small group format and the low incidence of pseudonyms in Facebook may reduce the tendency toward hostile interaction seen in anonymous forums.

1. During the pre-event phase, potential participants will arrive at a website page that describes the project and gives

instructions on participating. Those who wish to participate will give electronic consent. Participants will then be asked to grant the research application access to some of their Facebook profile information. Next, they will be asked a short survey on political and sustainability policy value orientations. Finally, they will be asked to tell a friend about the project. Participants will receive by email a welcome message from the City and be notified of their group placement.

2. Phase I's small group dialogue will bring together participants of diverse attitudes (measured through the pre-event survey) and demographics (as available via Facebook and survey). Each group will be composed of twelve participants, assuming about half will not fully participate. Only members of the group and project administrators will be able to read posts contributed to the group. A moderator will guide the group through two or three tasks, such as: (a) introductions and participation motivations, (b) vision for how people and goods move around the city, (c) collaboratively develop a response to a question posed to all groups (this is the primary task of the small groups).

3. Internet appropriate information materials produced in partnership with the City will be featured as background material to inform discussions. Experts will be available through the discussion for participants to ask questions and get clarification through asynchronous discussion. Experts will be recruited from academia and City of Vancouver. If community groups or businesses are involved as expert representatives, a concerted effort will be made to feature a balance of perspectives.

4. Phase II will share the ideas generated in the small group dialogues with the public, where everyone can discuss and vote on the best ideas. New participants are welcome to join at any time. This phase uses similar methodology as crowdstorming or ideation engagements popularly used by government (such as IdeaScale and UserVoice), in order to explore the impact of having small group dialogues prior to posting an idea for public review. New ideas are welcome but will not be featured in the same way as small group developed ideas. Top ideas (and perhaps other categories) generated by the small group discussions will be recognized and/or awarded (tbd).

5. Short surveys on environmental attitudes and policy opinions will be conducted at the start of participation, periodically during the small group process, and at the conclusion of the event.

#### **Moderation**

Skilled moderators will be recruited from international professional groups to provide volunteer support to the small group and public aspects of the engagement. Sources of these moderators include the Online-Facilitation listserve, *AmericaSpeaks* facilitator network and the Canadian Community for Dialogue and Deliberation.

Moderator honorariums will be provided (tbc).

#### **Facebook Feeds**

Some user activity in the engagement application will be featured on their Facebook wall (personal profile on Facebook) and newsfeed (real-time listing of one's friends' Facebook activity). This will increase exposure of the ideas being discussed and potentially recruit new participants. Participants will have control over what information they choose to share with whom, according to Facebook and app functionality.

#### **Community Advisors**

A range of groups and individuals will be invited to come together three times to support this project. Their role will be to ensure the projects' content is balanced and meaningful and participants are representative of those most affected by the issue. Approximately 15-20 people will comprise the committee; they will meet three times.

#### **Research Period**

The engagement will run for a total of five weeks. Recruitment will begin three weeks prior to the start of the event and be ongoing. Participants will be able to continue to use the site for an additional amount of time, with modest moderation in order to track persistence.

#### **Feedback to Participants**

Participants will be informed about results of the study through an announcement on the Facebook app and an email to the address they provided during the consent form signing. Results will also be communicated by the City of Vancouver's Engineering Department to the public.

#### **PARTICIPANTS**

The recruitment goal for Phase I is to attract a diverse group of approximately 200 Vancouver residents and stakeholders who use Facebook. It is expected that about half of this group will have low rates of participation. A concerted online and face to face effort will be undertaken to stimulate participation from a wide variety of communities of interest including those who may identify with the discussion topic (e.g. people interested in sustainability, disability advocates, local government, local businesses) and those who might not readily identify but may benefit from participation (e.g. caregivers, students, health advocates).

This research is examining the effects of civic engagement in social media spaces thus it is appropriate to engage subjects who are inclined or active in social media, rather than attempting to 'convert' people into social media users.

#### **Recruitment**

Potential subjects will be recruited through snowball sampling. This is an appropriate recruitment method for research related to social media because, by its very nature,

messages are spread through existing relationships and messages are more trusted when received via a known entity. A concerted effort will be undertaken to stimulate recruitment in a wide variety of communities of interest including those who may identify with the discussion topic (e.g. people interested in sustainability, businesses) and those who might not readily identify but may benefit from participation (e.g. caregivers, educators, health advocates).

#### PRIVACY

A potential risk for participants is misunderstanding Facebook privacy settings. It is important to note that the subject who is participating in the online civic engagement event can set their privacy settings to determine who may access their contributions. To support this informed choice-making, website based introductions to the research project will feature a reminder of privacy setting choices and a link to further information on how to adjust these settings, see <http://www.facebook.com/privacy/explanation.php>.

After consent, the research project will then request access to the user's Facebook account. Providing such access is an extremely common action taken by Facebook users. Anytime a Facebook user wishes to use an application in Facebook they must allow the application access to specific aspects of their account. OAuth is the industry standard for connecting accounts and applications while protecting Facebook users' privacy and personal information. This project will utilize OAuth to allow the subject to grant specific and limited access of her private Facebook information to the research application site, without sharing secure portions of her identity. For the purposes of the study, OAuth will enable social aspects of the application (such as sharing the moment when someone joins the study with that participant's friends). OAuth will also allow access to important but non-private participant information essential to the study's results (such as the user's location and gender). Participants may revoke their permission for an application to access their profile at any time. This action would end the participants' involvement with the research project.

#### CONCLUSION

This ambitious action research project will develop and measure a new approach for public engagement on sustainability options. Partnering with the City of Vancouver will ensure that the outcomes of the conversation have impact, an essential feature of asking the public to participate in a policy oriented conversation. There is still much to be explored in the field of social media as a site of civic participation and I hope this project will provide some valuable insight into the benefits and concerns.

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