Civic Networks: The Future of Community Engagement

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Abstract

While the recent revelations around Cambridge Analytica were startling to many, the truth is that advertising and data mining have always been Facebook's business model, and that of other social networking platforms. Their objective is to obtain as much user data as they can and "monopolize people's attention in order to make billions in online advertising", not to encourage civic engagement.[1] In contrast to social networks, civic networks are tied to place-based communities, such as streets, neighborhoods, schools, stratas/homeowner associations and more. Unlike social networks, users are treated as citizens who share in a digital public square – not commodities whose personal data is up for sale.

It is evident that a new paradigm is required for engaging with the public: inclusive **civic networks** that encourage ongoing engagement and empower the public as equal partners in the decisions that impact them and the places where they live, work, and play. PlaceSpeak has developed an authentic civic network which builds trust and empowers people to make meaningful change in their communities. By creating a safe, secure and privacy-protecting single "hub" for engagement, PlaceSpeak supports a culture of civic participation and make online democratic participation habit-forming.

Background

In the late 2000s, the growth and popularization of social media brought a wave of optimism around new and innovative methods of engaging with public. With socio-political movements such as the Arab Spring, which leveraged social media's ability for grassroots organizing, disseminating information and raising awareness, observers worldwide were inspired by its potential for facilitating and expanding democratic participation. Social media seemed to have the power to catalyze in-person political and citizen engagement. It was breaking down barriers to participation by providing a free and easy way for people to have their say and share real-time information from protests, rallies, and other forms of civic participation.

A key tenet of democracy is the ability for citizens to influence the decisions that impact them and their communities in a meaningful manner. Professor Graham Smith developed an analytical framework which evaluates methods for public participation based on six criteria: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, transparency, efficiency, and transferability.[2] The same framework can be applied to online methods such as social media:

- **Inclusiveness:** Citizen engagement processes must be inclusive and accessible to all. With the increasing ubiquity of digital/mobile technologies, online engagement has the potential to give people who are underrepresented in traditional forms of public input a voice.

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[1] Sifry, 2018
[2] Smith, 2009

- **Popular control:** Citizens must be empowered to participate meaningfully, in a legitimate process, and have an impact on decisions which affect them.
- **Considered judgement:** Not only should citizens have the ability to participate, they should do so in a reasonable, informed, and respectful manner.
- **Transparency:** The public input and decision-making processes should be open to citizens in order to build trust and confidence in the system.
- **Efficiency:** Digital forms of citizen engagement have the potential to save time and money while reaching a greater number of people.
- **Transferability:** Online participation is not limited by scale: from local decisions to large-scale matters involving the national or even global, best practices from the local level can scale quickly.

Unfortunately, the potential for social media platforms as a tool for fostering online democratic participation has fallen flat. While social media has democratized political discourse and engagement, the anonymous or pseudonymous nature of social media have simultaneously allowed trolls and online harassment to proliferate and act with impunity. The combination of depersonalization and deindividuation have emboldened people to behave and speak in ways which they would not do in a face-to-face interaction. According to a study from the Pew Research Center, "73% of adult internet users have seen someone be harassed in some way online and 40% have personally experienced it." Women are also disproportionately affected by more severe forms of online harassment, such as stalking and sexual harassment.[3]

While Twitter announced new guidelines against hate speech and sexual harassment in 2017, platforms have historically been slow to crack down on these forms of negative and abusive online behaviour.[4] Online harassment (including severe forms such as doxxing and death threats) continues to deter people from engaging online, rendering social media ineffective and unsuitable for inclusive and respectful civic dialogue. Similarly, well-intentioned citizens who want to have their say are often turned off by the trolling, cyberbullying or harassment which is rampant online – they simply choose to tune out.

Meanwhile, bots and fake accounts have become a growing challenge in facilitating productive conversations online. Bots aren't interested in, or capable of, rational thought or discussion. By their very nature, bots pump out simplistic information in a unidirectional fashion, which only adds to the existing noise around civic and political dialogue. Most social media platforms allow anyone to publish content without having to verify their identity – or even whether they're a real person. Twitter's internal metrics indicate that 14% of users are bots.[5] For example, an analysis of tweets by Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrera found that 20% of political tweets sent during the US presidential debates were produced by bots, primarily meant to influence or manipulate political discussions.[6]

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[3] Duggan, 2014
[4] Ratcliffe, 2017
[5] Mottl, 2014
[6] Campbell-Dollaghan, 2016

Meanwhile, Facebook's annual report has indicated that it struggles with determining which accounts are fake or real. The company deleted 583 million fake accounts in the first three months of 2018 – "more than a quarter of Facebook's 2.2 billion monthly active users."[7] This goes beyond being a mere nuisance. In early 2018, U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller found that Russian agents created and operated fake Facebook accounts pretending to be pro-Trump community members. These fake accounts were able to reach over 50,000 people in Florida, even mobilizing real Trump activists.[8] Most recently, it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica was able to obtain and use data from 50 million Facebook users to create psychographic profiles, which allowed them to deliver highly targeted and customized political advertising during the 2016 United States presidential election.

These failures of social media have not gone unnoticed by the public. From algorithms to privacy breaches, users are increasingly aware of the inherent problems with relying on social media as the predominant means for online civic engagement. There is a growing lack of credibility attributed to platforms such as social media and search engines.
In the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in social media dropped by 2% while trust in traditional media rose by 5% – only 51% of respondents indicated that they trusted social media.[9] Following the Cambridge Analytica revelations, 10% of survey respondents said that they would delete their Facebook accounts, while 73% indicated that would modify their use of the platform.[10] Public figures have also rushed to disassociate themselves; for example, Elon Musk deleted Tesla and SpaceX's Facebook pages in response to a public challenge.[11]

It is evident that a new paradigm is required for engaging with the public. We need to build inclusive civic networks that go beyond targeting voters during the election cycle. We need to design technologies that facilitate and encourage ongoing political engagement in between elections. We need to create vehicles for public input which empower the public as equal partners in the decisions that impact them and the places where they live, work, and play. PlaceSpeak has been developing a **civic network** to tackle the issues of declining public trust and lack of civic participation.

What are civic networks?

In contrast to social networks, where people are empowered to connect with like-minded individuals all across the world, civic networks are online social networks that are tied to place-based communities, such as streets, neighborhoods, schools, stratas/homeowner associations and more. It can often be challenging, inconvenient, or intimidating to participate through in-person methods such as public hearings or town hall meetings. As people

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[7] Ng, 2018
[8] Kafka, 2018
[9] Edelman, 2018
[10] CBC, 2018
[11] Grush, 2018

increasingly live more of their lives online, it is crucial to provide legitimate and authentic methods for them to engage with these communities online. Civic networks facilitate a wide range of citizen engagement functions, "from allowing people to communicate with each other via e-mail to encouraging involvement in local decision-making to developing economic opportunities in disadvantaged communities".[12]

Civic networks also go a long way towards building strong communities. In a 2012 study by the Vancouver Foundation, respondents identified concern over a growing sense of isolation and disconnection in their communities.[13] A follow-up study in 2017 identified that while only 14% reported feeling lonely "often" or "almost always", 50% of respondents found it hard to make new friends. However, when asked about the barriers to getting involved, 51% of respondents said that they didn't have enough time, while 22% said that they didn't have the money to do so. Meanwhile, 55% of respondents already "use technology to connect with people and friends in the community".[14] Civic networks make it easy and cost-effective for people to identify with their community and stay connected, in their own time, from the comfort of their own homes or while on-the-go.

Just as a social network provides a single stop to interact, follow, share, and communicate with family, friends, and others in a variety of social contexts, civic networks provide a hub for people to engage with all types of civic-related activities in their community – from providing public input to interacting with neighbors to grassroots organizing. To create a genuine citizen-centered network, where the individual is placed at the heart of the process, digital identity authentication to **place** is crucial. Identity authentication – that is, proving that you are the person who you say you are – is taken for granted in the physical world. For example, people are required to show identification in order to open a bank account, vote, or board an airplane. The same needs to happen online. How can we ensure that people are who they claim to be, online? In this case, how can we be certain that people are *where* they say they are?

PlaceSpeak connects users' digital identity (profile account) to their physical location (e.g. residential address) in order to facilitate genuine online connections between individuals and the place-based communities which are physically in their vicinity. Once they have been authenticated, they have the option to stay informed, engage with, and participate in their community in progressively more involved ways.

As users are authenticated to place on PlaceSpeak, people can be confident that they are interacting with real members of their community. Unlike with social media platforms, the authentication process ensures that those interacting are not bots or spammers. The knowledge that these are real people, just like themselves, helps to tackle the combined effects of deindividuation and depersonalization – people are less likely to behave in

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[12] London, 2016
[13] Vancouver Foundation, 2012
[14] Vancouver Foundation, 2017

inappropriate ways online if they know that there is a real person on the other end – especially one who they might run into at the grocery store, or while picking up their child at school.

Furthermore, in acknowledging that the majority of people simply do not have the time to keep up with multiple avenues for civic and community engagement, PlaceSpeak offers a one-stop shop for getting involved. Instead of having to visit multiple websites, subscribe to several mailing lists, and adjust their privacy settings for each platform, people only have to keep up with and customize their settings for a single "hub". Once users are authenticated to place, they can engage with a wide range of local issues, be it participating in a consultation on a new development in the neighborhood or asking for recommendations for a babysitter. By reducing the barriers and time required for ongoing engagement, PlaceSpeak supports a culture of civic participation and make online democratic participation habit-forming.

PlaceSpeak and the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

Moving from "Inform" through to "Empower", the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum was designed "to help groups define the public's role in any public participation process".[15] PlaceSpeak has built a robust suite of tools and features to facilitate engagement at all levels. The public can leverage a variety of tools and features to become informed and engaged, to the extent that they wish to be. The following section outlines each level of the IAP2 Spectrum, and the promise to the public which each level represents.[16]

Inform: "We will keep you informed."

Once users have been authenticated to their physical location, it is possible to keep them informed about relevant news and updates about activities and changes that are happening around them, e.g. rezoning, development permits, transportation, special events, film permits, road works, and more. PlaceSpeak makes it easy to stay informed by providing a single hub for updates. By leveraging open data, PlaceSpeak can pull updates from a variety of different organizations and automate the delivery of place-based notifications directly to users' inboxes based on their profile preferences.

In doing so, PlaceSpeak breaks down the silos between governments at all levels (local/municipal, state/provincial, federal), between different departments or agencies, and different organizations in the area. Instead of having to visit or subscribe to several different websites or mailing lists to stay updated, PlaceSpeak users only have to register once and can then be informed of potential changes – whether it's a rezoning notice from the city, or a scheduled power outage from the utilities, or a change in bus routes from the transportation authority.

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[15] IAP2 International Federation, 2014
[16] Ibid.

Consult: "We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision."

Being informed is only the first step in the citizen engagement process. Users are kept notified of opportunities to provide feedback to decision-makers about issues that directly impact them and their communities. PlaceSpeak offers several tools for consulting with the public, such as:

- Simple (geospatial) polls
- Surveys

As users have been authenticated, decision-makers can clearly identify where participants are coming from (within or outside their jurisdiction), and establish the scope of participation. For example, decision-makers may decide to limit participation on hyperlocal or municipal issues to residents only. Organizations with topics such as local budgets may want to ensure that participants are limited to those who actually reside or pay taxes in the city. Decision-makers can then ensure that they are collecting high-quality feedback from real, relevant individuals who will be affected by the final outcomes.

However, in recognizing that decision-makers may want to hear from both residents and non-residents, PlaceSpeak allows administrators to customize each feedback tool to determine the scope of participation. For example, a tourist attraction may be well-utilized by both locals and tourists alike. Within a consultation about the future of this attraction, the poll may be open to anyone, but the discussion forum may be only open to residents. This allows for more granular and flexible permission settings, allowing for the collection of robust and nuanced feedback data to guide decision-making.

Involve: "We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision."

PlaceSpeak also offers more in-depth means of involving residents in conversations about issues that matter to them and their community. They can participate in two-way dialogue using text, images or video, respond to others' comments, and upvote/downvote submissions from others. The tools offered can be customized to collect the most accurate feedback for effective decision-making, including:

- Discussion forums
- Ideation features
- Interactive mapping

Unlike social media platforms, which have come under fire for their inability and unwillingness to deal with issues of cyberbullying and online harassment, PlaceSpeak offers a safe, secure, and respectful space for community members to engage in dialogue. Even when participants

disagree with one another, they are expected to do so respectfully, without resorting to slurs, profanity, or discriminatory language. As participants have been authenticated prior to participation, PlaceSpeak sends a clear message that individuals should take responsibility for their online contributions, and that online abuse or harassment will not be tolerated. This ensures genuine and inclusive online dialogue where people do not feel deterred from participating due to the fear of being harassed.

Collaborate: "We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible."

For participants, knowing that their feedback has made an impact is critical to making engagement meaningful and habit-forming. People are busy and their time is valuable. When participants are able to see the tangible effects that their input has had on a project or issue, they are more likely to stay engaged and participate in the future.

The "black boxes" of email forms and market research panels have bred mistrust and cynicism – participants provide feedback, and policy decisions mysteriously emerge on the other side. While decision-makers can claim support for a given policy or initiative, those outcomes are easy to dispute without transparency. With built-in features for ongoing engagement and real-time visualizations of feedback data, PlaceSpeak makes it easy to "close the loop"; that is, demonstrate to participants how their feedback made an impact on the final decision.

For example, the Updates feature allows organizations to notify participants not only at the end of the project, but also along each stage throughout the engagement timeline. The feedback provided by participants is also kept transparent throughout and after the consultation has ended. Anyone – regardless of whether they are a PlaceSpeak user, or whether they reside in the affected area – can still browse the consultation, view the resources uploaded, read the discussion comments, look at the poll results, and more. This helps to build trust in the process and encourages greater accountability between decision-makers and citizens.

Empower: "We will implement what you decide."

While the "Empower" stage of the IAP2 Spectrum can be challenging for many decision-makers, PlaceSpeak has built in features which empower grassroots engagement and local community-building. For example, the Neighborhoods feature allows users to interact with others within their immediate vicinity about community issues, public safety, new initiatives, and more. They can choose to engage with their community in a self-directed fashion without a consultation being initiated by local decision-makers using a variety of tools, such as:

- Private messaging
- Noticeboard, e.g. community discussions, lost and found, etc.

- Events calendar
- Future features to come, e.g. petitions

In addition, PlaceSpeak has built a prototype for referenda and voting, called PlaceVote. The system would require additional levels of verification, such as integration with government ID (e.g. driver's licence, health services cards, etc.) to ensure that people are who they say they are. There is some evidence to suggest that offering alternative methods for participation, such as voting by mail, can increase turnout when combined with reminders (e.g. notifications).[17] This offers significant potential for increasing participation amongst demographics who may be less likely to turn out, or face barriers to voting.

Building trust through privacy

However, privacy concerns are even more salient in today's world. Users need to be confident that the information which has been used to authenticate their identity cannot be abused or compromised. PlaceSpeak has been architected to reflect Privacy by Design principles, which assumes that privacy is the **default**.[18] No action is required on the part of the individual to protect their privacy; their personal information and data is private by default, unless they choose to make that information available.

For example, the feedback data collected during citizen engagement processes is disaggregated from participants' information (e.g. physical address, email address, etc.) This includes the very organizations conducting consultations, which never have access to the personal information of participants, by design. The personal information of users is also never shared, sold, or otherwise distributed with any other organization or company. This allows PlaceSpeak to effectively authenticate the user's identity while protecting their privacy. Its business model reinforces its commitment to privacy: PlaceSpeak runs on a Software as a Service (SaaS) model, where organizations conducting consultations pay a licence fee to use the platform. This allows PlaceSpeak to be self-sustaining without having to rely on advertising revenue or by selling user data.

Furthermore, PlaceSpeak has a simple and user-friendly interface for users to determine their own privacy settings. Registered users may choose to be publicly shown as anonymous when posting on discussion boards, though they will still have been authenticated in advance. That being said, less than 5% of PlaceSpeak users choose to be publicly anonymous: the authentication process establishes the norm where people stand behind their feedback and contributions. By simultaneously authenticating users and protecting individual privacy, PlaceSpeak provides a safe and secure environment for online civic participation while building trust.

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[17] Bergman, 2015
[18] Privacy by Design: The 7 Foundational Principles, 2011

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