An Opportunity for E–Democracy in Rebuilding Lower Manhattan

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INTRODUCTION

Following the events of September 11, 2001 (9-11), the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York established a forum for the purposes of gathering citizen opinions on the nature of the rebuilding of New York City's Lower Manhattan area. Citizens gave their opinions on the development of space for a memorial, performing arts spaces, museums, restaurants, hotels, residences and businesses. This effort was named "Listening to the City." Civic Alliance organized two types of citizen opinion-gathering strategies: face-to-face focus groups and online dialog focus groups (www.listeningtothecity.org). The purpose of this article is to assess citizen satisfaction with veness of the online format of citizen involvement in making decisions regarding the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan following the attacks of 9-11. The results contribute to our understanding of the use of Internet technology in gathering citizen opinions in urban development and planning.

BACKGROUND

In the United States (U.S.), research into digital government and citizen participation conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s has highlighted the need to re-think the paradigm of citizenship. The three primary changes of traditional paradigm have been: (1) considering the citizen as a customer; (2) understanding the citizen's capacity in participation in public affairs and policy making; and (3) addressing the underlying weaknesses and problems in this form of representation democracy (Holzer, Hu, & Song, 2005). The ultimate goal of digital citizenship has been to develop and maintain new human relationships between the individual (citizen), people (community) and organization (government). The goals of these projects have been to operationalize the process of direct citizen involvement and influence in policy priorities; to enhance government accountability; and to encourage digital citizenship.

The primary case study research in digital democracy has been centered on Minnesota State Government Department; City of Santa Monica; California Governor's Office; City of Virginia Beach; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and Prince William County, Virginia. In these cases, citizens have been asked to present their perceptions and concerns through surveys and other feedback mechanisms to gain their participation and to empower citizens to set priorities. Each of these government entities has demonstrated its desire to have enhanced government accountability by publishing Accountability Reports on the Internet and the California Scorecard. These entities also realized the need to address the underlying weaknesses and problems of representative democracy by providing convenient platforms for the public to access and respond to public issues.

Urban planning incorporates regulation as well as social/political and economic inclusion, which has costs as well as benefits (Hoffmann, 2003). Civic involvement in planning is critical and involves an exchange between government and the community, giving the community control while disciplining and stabilizing the planning process. The outcome of participative planning is community pride and collaboration, important civic values (Johnson & Ward, 1972). Planning, particularly in urban areas, has become market driven, since many of these areas are under-serviced and under-retailed (Porter, 1995).

Organizations have effectively harnessed Internet technology to streamline their communications inside and outside the organization. The concept of "community" has been redefined by the Internet through chat rooms and discussion group technology, where citizens can take active roles in real time (synchronous) or respond at their convenience 24 hours per day, 7 days per week (24/7) in an asynchronous format.

By 2000, more than 54 million US households had one or more computers (US Census Bureau, 2001). In households where income was $75,000 or higher, 88% had one or more computers, and Internet usage in households of more than $75,000 was 79%. Single persons were the least likely to have a computer and Internet access. In metropolitan areas, such as New York City, 46% of households had computers and 38% had Internet access (U.S Census Bureau, 2001).

However, online information gathering often tends to result in collecting data from the wealthier, more educated "information rich" as opposed to the entire population (Kakabadse, Kadabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003). Therefore, before accepting online information gathering as a panacea for citizen involve-

ment, one must be aware of the risk that not all voices may be heard. Random sampling may also be problematic, since such a sample will be limited to those citizens who have a home computer, high-speed Internet access and are computer savvy; (Palmquist & Stueve, 1996) and often, are female users (Barry, 2000).

In addition to the advantages of ease, speed and efficiency, online gathering of citizen opinions features the ability to easily provide searchable background material and references on the topics being discussed. This feature allows a citizen who may not be an "expert" on the topic at hand to become knowledgeable. The use of online resources in the form of newsletters and references can easily facilitate becoming knowledgeable on a topic in a short period of time (Bouras, Katris, & Triantafillou, 2003).

The methods by which communities can be involved in urban planning and development have been influenced by the rapid expansion of the Internet. Participation in an online forum is a function of motivation, ease of communication and the social economic status of the individual (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003). Individuals are motivated to participate when they perceive that they can contribute actively and freely, and provide unique information. They may also have their needs for affiliation and power satisfied. The feeling that one can contribute to and have an impact on the group motivates participation in the group.

A mediating factor in an individual's motivation and ability to participate in an online community exchange is its ease of use, as well as the level of that person's computer efficacy. Computer efficacy can be described as an individual's perception of his or her ability to use the computer.

A particular personality— for example, active, efficacious or generous— will contribute to participation in the online community. According to Wang and Fesenmaier (2003), people who participate in such activities are more likely to be expressive, sensing-judging, high in self esteem, high in competence, high in internal locus of control, low in need for approval and high in moral development. In addition, participation is also a function of a person's involvement in his or her community.

In 1995, there were only 5 Web sites; by the number of Web sites increased. This dramatic development of the

The purpose of this research was to examine citizens' opinions on the use of online technology to facilitate their input on the rebuilding of New York City's Lower Manhattan area following the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

METHODOLOGY

During the summer of 2002, AmericaSpeaks convened a series of large-scale public participation forums entitled "The 21st Century Town Meeting" following the 9/11 attacks. Working with leaders, citizens and media organizations, AmericaSpeaks coordinated two face-to-face citizen groups at the Javits Center July 20 and 22. AmericaSpeaks also recruited Web Lab, a nonprofit group dedicated to developing the use of the Internet, to explore public issues by convening 26 online dialog groups between July 29 and August 12. Over that 2-week period, citizens participated in online discussion groups. In these dialogs, 818 people working simultaneously in 26 small discussion groups (30 people per group) participated in the exchange of ideas and reviewed proposals and debated policy issues. Thirteen groups were assigned a facilitator; the remaining groups were unfacilitated. The groups responded to six concept plans presented for the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site and the surrounding area. Each plan consisted of memorial space, open spaces, areas for housing cultural institutions, a hotel, 11 million square feet of office space and a new transportation center. Not only did the citizens exchange more than 10,000 messages, but they also participated in 32 opinion polls on various topics that emerged during that period of online discussion.

Using small group discussion (SGD) software, citizens were assigned by computer to groups based on their demographic characteristics to assure diversity within each group. Unlike traditional online discussion boards, SGD software (1) assigns participants to multiple small groups, rather than creating a crowded, anonymous mass; (2) uses group member "bios" and introductions to promote intimacy and dramatically reduce "flaming"; and (3) sets a limited lifespan for each group, promoting commitment and providing closure. SGD software was developed by Web Lab to use the power of the Internet as a positive, transformative force in society at large (www.weblab.org/home.html).

Following the online dialog sessions, all 550 people who participated received an electronically distributed online survey to gather their opinions on the effectiveness and efficiency of the online dialog process. The survey was comprised of 50 objective questions, 13 demographic questions and 6 open-ended questions in the following categories: (1) computer usage and political action activities; (2) dialog sessions content and group facilitation; (3) number and content of messages posted by other participants; and (4) ability to post messages.

RESULTS

Two hundred and forty-four individuals responded to the follow-up survey (Table 1). The majority of the respondents (54.7%) indicated that they were between the ages of 35 and 54. The gender of the respondents was evenly divided between females (51.7%) and males (48.3%). Although minority groups were represented, an overwhelming 81.9% of respondents were Caucasian. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents possessed college or postgraduate degrees. Income levels appeared to be equally distributed between the range of $25,000 to $100,000. However, 32.3% indicated an income of more than $100,000 and 9.1% indicated incomes of less than $25,000.