Chapter 13
Capturing Volunteered Historical Information:
Lessons from Development of a Local Government Crowdsourcing Tool

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ABSTRACT

Government agencies are adopting a variety of web-based strategies to improve information systems, increase civic engagement, and enhance decision-making capabilities and planning processes. Within the U.S., a university research team designed a municipal web tool called the Austin Historical Survey Wiki to fill a pragmatic need for information about historic resources to be used for long range planning and development review purposes. The authors situate this web experiment in relation to an array of models for government interaction with citizens via data collection efforts and the application of GIS and web-based technologies. This experiment offers local government agencies and practitioners a replicable model for tracking official data and citizen contributions to a GIS. In addition, this research offers insights into potential barriers to and requirements for collaboration between government agencies and citizens online.

INTRODUCTION

A growing number of city governments aspire to be "civic laboratories" where web-based and mobile technologies are applied in experiments to increase the efficacy of municipal services in a quest for "smarter," more efficient, and more participatory cities (Townsend, 2013). These experiments include innovation in the use of social media and apps, crowdsourcing platforms, and web-based geographic information systems (GIS) for urban planning and public administration (Townsend, 2013; Evans-

Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013; Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011). They aim to enhance municipal decision-making by incorporating the willingness of citizens to volunteer their time, perspectives, and knowledge.

Working within planning departments, some historic preservation programs are expanding the use of digital technologies to serve preservation and urban planning. An example is the award-winning, multi-million-dollar effort of the City of Los Angeles to survey historic resources citywide, including development of specialized GIS tools, a web presence for public outreach and data collection, and a robust public engagement plan to accomplish it (Bernstein, Sun, & Sucre, 2009; City of Los Angeles, 2013; Jarmusch, 2011). In a simultaneous, but less-resourced initiative in Austin, Texas, a university-based team created The Austin Historical Survey Wiki (referred to throughout this article as the Wiki) as municipal web infrastructure to maintain a cumulative database of historic resources that is open to public contributions. Through this web-based tool, historic resources are intended to be surveyed, documented, and maintained over time by a combination of municipal officials, professional preservationists, and interested members of the public.

The Wiki was inspired by visions of advancing municipal decision-making and planning support systems. The effort was based on the conviction that public participation, online or otherwise, can give governments a firmer basis for making decisions that are more defensible, representative, and potentially more equitable, because they arise from pluralistic, democratic processes. The project also originated out of a pragmatic need for timely information about historic resources to serve the City of Austin's long range planning and regulatory functions, which includes drafting land use plans, designation of historic landmarks and historic districts, and review of demolition and remodeling permits. These data have been collected primarily by expert consultants; in recent years, resource constraints led the City to experiment with volunteer data collection under professional supervision or review.

This project resulted in a collaborative platform that can be used to facilitate public involvement in data collection and maintenance. Within this model, government officials can disseminate "official data," while also allowing "unofficial" public contributions that are either promoted to official data or remain publicly accessible alongside it. The Wiki tests the hypothesis that through this web infrastructure, a local government can gather and maintain data through online engagement with the public and that the result will not only be useful data, but more robust public participation in local government decision-making.[1]

This article describes the web experiment and the conclusions of authors as to the successes and barriers identified during and after the project. The authors first review literature related to web-based technologies and models for online participation in planning processes. The literature describes developments in the application of GIS and web-based technologies that are aimed at facilitating the interaction and exchange of information between government agencies and citizens.[2] The next section delves into the use of historical surveys by local government, and the university-based hypotheses and local government needs that spurred the development of the Wiki. A third section details the collaborative design and development process, describing the features of the Wiki in relation to debates and tensions in information technology design identified by the research team. A fourth section describes the results of testing and launch of the Wiki. The authors conclude that the experiment produced a valuable model that could be replicated in other contexts. The authors also show how opening a government database on-line does little to democratize information if there is insufficient will, knowledge or resources to foster continued participation. The result reveals both the promise and pitfalls in experimentation with online civic engagement both within and beyond historic preservation and urban planning.

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