

# Chapter 11

## Civic Engagement in Local Environmental Initiatives: Reaping the Benefits of a Diverse Media Landscape

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The goal of this chapter is to draw attention to the interrelation of multiple mediatized relationships, including face-to-face interaction, in local civic engagement around biodiversity and the environment. The authors propose that civic engagement and participation transcend the type of media used, and that artificial distinctions between online and offline participation are unproductive. Their argument is supported by three examples of participatory projects in which social media-based and face-to-face interactions are closely interrelated. This contribution highlights local uses of social media and the web. It shows how engagement plays out across multiple channels and how resources can be found in a variety of media formats. In particular, online media significantly alter the visibility of both local actions and of the resulting data.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When studying civic engagement and public participation, one policy area cannot be overlooked in international and national debate: the environment. Throughout the 20th century, concerns about pollution, conservation of biodiversity as well as about energy sources and their environmental implications gained in visibility. The 21st century has brought a push towards sustainable development as institutions, governments and citizens have started “going green.” Despite growing awareness, the complexity of both environmental issues themselves and the interplay between diverse stakeholders have often limited public

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participation. As scientific knowledge is often required to allow for a better grasp of key problems and prospective solutions, initiatives to improve public understanding of science and enlarge opportunities for participation in scientific projects to non-professionals have increased in the environmental sciences and related fields such as biology and zoology (Bonney, Cooper & Ballard, 2016; Nascimento, Pereira & Ghezzi, 2014; Science Communication Unit, 2013).

Networked information technologies are changing the way environmental knowledge is produced and communicated. On the one hand, the digitization and availability of research data on the Internet enables its circulation among increasingly diverse publics – across disciplines, with government actors, the public, and so on. On the other, social media and participatory platforms create spaces that facilitate communication and interactions between professionals and amateurs.

The goal of this chapter is to draw attention to the interrelation of multiple mediatized relationships, including face-to-face interaction, in sustaining and structuring communicative practices and local civic engagement around biodiversity and environmental issues. The rapidly evolving media landscape creates both challenges and opportunities for media management by environmental organizations. The chapter highlights the local uses of social media and the Web and argues that the relationship between public involvement and the media can be fruitfully theorized without focusing specifically on the type of media used.<sup>1</sup> The authors propose that civic engagement and participation transcend the type of media used, and that one interaction format nourishes the other in many cases. They support their argument with several examples of participatory projects, all connected with environmental issues, and in which social media-based and face-to-face interactions are closely interrelated. The examples come from different parts of the world, all are relatively local in scale and all rely on both personal outreach and social media. These cases challenge the established (social, scientific or political) order in different ways and open up spaces in which alternative sustainable futures may be shaped. These results have concrete implications for environmental NGOs using digital media to raise awareness, create spaces for exchange or increase visibility.

The chapter is organized in three sections. The background section contains a brief literature review and an outline of three cases studied by the authors in two research projects (see Acknowledgements). The discussion is organized thematically in two parts. First, the authors draw attention to the importance of place and local anchoring experienced by participants, and to how local actions and contributions can participate in knowledge creation and mobilization at larger scales. They then discuss the relationship between various media and mediatized relationships in this process. The cases illustrate multiple channels for exchange, and the use of resources in a variety of media formats, from books, local media and flyers to email, databases, interactive maps and social media. In particular, online media significantly alter the visibility of local actions and their results. The increased visibility afforded by the Internet and social media appears as both an advantage and a potential problem.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Civic Engagement and the Environment**

The environmental science and policy literature recognizes the importance of civic engagement as a means of collecting data, advocating for social change and environmental justice, making science more inclusive, and enhancing social-ecological connections (Danielsen, Burgess, & Balmford, 2005; McKinley

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