


Chapter 67


Smart Place Making Through Digital Communication and Citizen Engagement: London and Madrid

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ABSTRACT

The disruptive growth of new information technologies is transforming the dynamics of citizen communication and engagement in the urban context. In order to create new, smart, inclusive, and transparent urban environments, the city governments of London and Madrid have implemented a series of innovative digital applications and citizen communication channels. Through a case study approach, this research assesses the best practices in the field of digital communication and citizen engagement implemented by London and Madrid, with a particular focus on the profile, content, and functions of these new channels. The results of this research are intended to identify relevant new dynamics of interaction and value co-creation for cities and their residents.

INTRODUCTION

The impressive growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) since the end of the 20th century, is transforming the metabolism of modern cities. Places, people and objects have been linked together through digital flows of data and content that create new social dynamics and shape new paradigm of urban place making (Castells, 1996; Sassen, 2011). Virtual representation and digital environments

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have become essential policy-making tools for an effective engagement of urban stake-holders around key values, culture and challenges of urban places (Govers, 2015).

Although the impact of urban innovation associated with ICTs is quite uneven throughout the world, the smart city model is an increasingly common reference in professional forums and academic debates about the challenges of prosperous and sustainable urban development (Albino, Berardi, & Dangelico, 2015). Smart cities are beginning to be identified as an exceptional way of improving the efficiency of urban services and the quality of life of city residents, reducing environmental impact and establishing a new model for relations between all urban stakeholders (Caragliu, Del Bo, & Nijkamp, 2011; Giffinger et al, 2007).

In the context of this new smart urban logic, the role of citizens as key actors of urban development is getting greater attention. The concept of citizen participation is being revisited, fostering the paradigm of active citizen engagement and participatory democracy as key premises of smart place making. In parallel to the emergence of new formulas allowing greater legitimation of the political authorities, meaningful efforts from policy-makers are oriented towards the idea of participatory democracy, developing new procedures to incorporate citizens into public decisions on social transformation strategies (Alguacil, 2006). Furthermore, citizen engagement takes on particular importance in participatory budgeting, when citizens are not only encouraged to propose the development of specific projects and social initiatives in their cities, but also to cast their vote to carry them out.

The impact of ICTs on the everyday reality of a city and some new formats of interpersonal communication emerging between urban residents can be seen in the new dynamics of social cooperation and citizen mobilisation (Rheingold, 2002). The founding of social activist groups operating both in physical and virtual urban environments is increasingly common. The emergence of smart communities, together with the ease of access to urban data and content through the many municipal apps, contribute to consolidating collective intelligence, citizen innovation and a more active, responsible attitude to urban development (Capdevila & Zarlenga, 2015; Albino et al., 2015).

Alongside the growing public activism on social networks, the smart urban space acts as a catalyst for disruptive experiences in virtual environments, a space for learning, innovation and knowledge production (Hollands, 2008; Carrillo, 2006). Through virtual reality and geo-location apps making it possible to personalise all content, new flexible urban narratives are being offered adapted to the interests and concerns of different groups of the population (Koeck & Warnaby, 2015).

New smart approach is also evident in the multiplication of digital media formats and channels, segmented so that all urban stakeholders can consume and enjoy the city. The new technologies have brought speed, convenience and proximity, among other advantages, to everyday political communication techniques. A range of interactive communication possibilities has also opened up that would have been unthinkable with other tools and supports (Almansa & Castillo, 2014). Policy-makers, aware of the growing role of citizens both as generators of content about the urban area on social networks and in virtual spaces and, more traditionally, as co-creators of urban reality, are paying increasing attention to channels for communication with them. Rather than the normal pattern of a one-way, vertical monologue characteristic of communication between cities and their residents until the end of the 20th century, in which cities disseminated the information they considered relevant via the mass media and some of their owned media, such as newsletters or customer care lines (Graham, 2014), modern cities are choosing citizen relational, multi-directional communication models with active public involvement (Therkelsen, 2015; Campillo Alhama, 2012).

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