Social Media to facilitate Public Participation in IA

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ID: 92 | **Type**: Paper | **Session**: Social Media and Public Participation in IA

Abstract

Social media are web-based and mobile technologies that facilitate interaction between organizations, communities and individuals. Important characteristics are that the technologies are ubiquitous, communication instantaneous and that they enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, WordPress, and YouTube are just a few of the hundreds of applications that make participatory information sharing and social networking possible. These new social media are being used to organize events, communicate information, develop positions, solicit membership, distribute petitions, and share documents, photographs, and videos. Given the rapid adoption by citizens around the globe for a diversity of purposes, it is timely to ask what role social media is playing or could play in facilitating public participation in impact assessment. Since many projects are large, complex and controversial social media may be used to mobilize resistance. But it may also be used to distribute documents and prepare positions for hearings or written submissions and used during follow-up programming. Hence stakeholders on all sides of controversial projects might make use of these new forms of communication. This paper will consider how social media are being used and how it could be used in environmental, social and health impact assessment. We will focus on governance dilemmas and raise issues on good practices for public participation through social media.

Introduction

"*Twitter provides teeth to the masses*" was the headline in one of the major Dutch newspapers, the Volkskrant, in February 2012. It drew our attention. The article claimed that internet users in the USA frequently succeed in blocking plans of companies, foundations and governments. The example figuring in the article is a cancer research foundation changing its funding policy under immediate heavy public pressure, but the same article also claims that multinationals, banks, lobby groups and even dictators and autocrats and all those other who thought governance was unidirectional, have to fear for the mobilization power of the new media. Clearly social media sparked and fuelled the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The internet and social media helped mobilizing protests against Putin in the weeks before the Russian elections but also forced the Bank of America and JPMorgan Chase to withdraw intended service fee raises. Moreover social media operate real-time and the quick response time makes, according to Mark Ghuneim of Trendrr (on cit.), that responses and protests are immediate and become part of the actual event. A most recent example of the latter is the viral video action #stopkony2012 in March 2012, which after more than 10 years of silence suddenly sparked the cry for justice in Central Africa. In this respect the digital revolution is a step

'IAIA12 Conference Proceedings'
Energy Future *The Role of Impact Assessment*
32nd Annual Meeting of the International Association for Impact Assessment
27 May- 1 June 2012, Centro de Congresso da Alfândega, Porto - Portugal (www.iaia.org)

towards democratization of power, claims Elshout (2012) the author of the cited newspaper article, and he continues: "Social networks form a good platform for organizing countervailing power by political activists and consumers".[trad. BE] The same or related argumentation can also be found in more established scientific literature on internet use for mobilization, for instance by Hirzalla et al (2010) and Hara (2008). Others, like Bennett et al. (2008) and Sreberny and Khiabany (2011) discuss the mobilization power of digital media in the US and blogs in Iran; While Karpf (2011) discusses whether these new social media and internet sources is not just old wine in new bottles; is not the blog just the new flyer? Nielsen (2011) argues along the same line and stresses that we should not forget the impact of the mobile phone. Their critical comments have in common that the new communication devices are not the cause but rather the tools for change. In the next sections we will present some examples from the Netherlands illustrating the potential strengths and weaknesses of these new 'tools for change' in a context of impact assessment and policy making. In the discussion section we will turn to some governance dilemmas and 'agendize' some issues for public participation practitioners

Mobilization and Contested Expertise

In this paper we will start from the positive assumption is that new mobile and networked communication technologies will facilitate the participatory process. (Brabham, 2009)
With the rise of the Internet, the public domain is growing; information that used to be in the expert domain is becoming publicly available and new mechanisms for public involvement are being explored.

Mobilization

With ubiquitous networked and mobile communication systems access to information and communication is instantaneous, seriously challenging the response time of formal institutions. For instance, within minutes after the 7.9 earthquake struck Sichuan Province in May 2008, news on the quake broke on Twitter. Rapidly Twitter reports of shaking buildings and evacuated offices from Chengdu, Shanghai and Beijing were linked to Google maps, showing the epicenter of the quake. Videos of children hiding under their desks soon found their way to YouTube. In some districts, school buildings crumbled to rubble while nearby government buildings remained intact and the evidence was there to see all who wanted it. The flurry of mobile reporting on collapsed schools brought faulty school design and embezzlement by local authorities to the fore, despite initial official attempts to cover up mistakes.

Contested Expertise

On the other hand, hypes can spread quickly on the Internet as well. In the Netherlands, a traditional government television campaign for the vaccination against cervical cancer for girls aged 12-15 years was mounted in February 2009. Rumors about the negative side-effects of the inoculation spread via social media such as Hyves, Facebook, MSN and YouTube. The emotional accounts of distressed mothers who had lost their daughters to the vaccine had an overpowering effect, even though the stories were false. In a reaction,

the director of the National Health and Environment Institute (RIVM) stated in national newspaper Trouw[1]:

> *"Popular resistance against vaccines had been around for a while, but never to the extend as we experienced during the campaign against cervical cancer. (...) At first, we dismissed the resistance as a marginal phenomenon. We ridiculed the rumours and countered them with rational arguments. But the public didn't buy this. (...) On the Internet, facts and opinions blur; the view of a distressed mother weighs as much as an analysis of someone who knows what he is talking about."*

As a consequence of the panic stories, only 49% of the targeted teenage girls received an inoculation by March 2009: by all formal accounts the campaign failed miserably. The RIVM didn't research the perception amongst teenage girls, nor did they research how to best reach out to this target group. A new campaign was mounted later that year, using an Internet strategy and propping regular people in support of the campaign rather than "boring scientists with their factual information".[2]

Citizens governance through crowdsourcing

An interesting example is of networked communication is *crowdsourcing*, coined by Howe (2006) as "the use of the collective intelligence of an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call". The crowd of volunteers outperforms experts in making good predictions, because collectively they have access to far more data (Surowiecki, 2004) and the larger the pool of participants, the more creativity, which is salient in solving complex problems (Benkler, 2002). The initiative to use the 'wisdom of the crowd' can either come from an organization, like the city council of Smallingerland in the next example or, for instance, the UK government soliciting ideas to improve the way public information is communicated[3], or from the crowd itself, such as the development of the Linux operating system or the online dictionary Wikipedia.

Citizens governance

The local authorities of Smallingerland in the north of the Netherlands decided to put ideas into practice and opened up the planning process for a new residential area in Opeinde[4]. In October 2008, they launched the website www.wijbouweneenwijk.nl[5] [in English: 'we build a neighbourhood' – ACN]. Inspired by famous examples of peer

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[1] Becker, S., Lucas, N., 2009. Nieuwe campagne voor 'meidenprik' *Trouw* (daily newspaper) 28/12/09. http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/4324/Nieuws/article/detail/1178083/2009/12/28/Nieuwe-campagne-voor-rsquo-meidenprik-rsquo.dhtml

[2] http://www.nu.nl/binnenland/2196655/opnieuw-vaccinatie-baarmoederhalskanker.html (posted 2 March 2010, last visited 28.03.12)

3   http://www.showusabetterway.co.uk (last visited 15 May 2009)

4   The municipality of Smallingerland is located in the north of the Netherlands. It has a population of around 55,000. The village of Opeinde has a population of 1,668. Source: http://www.smallingerland.nl/smartsite.shtml?ch=INT&id=55233 (last visitied on 24 Mar 2011)

5   http://www.wijbouweneenwijk.nl (last visited 15 May 2009)

collaboration projects such as Wikipedia, and Goldcorp[6], Smallingerland embarked on an approach of building an Internet community where "everyone, residents of Opeinde, residents of Smallingerland, students, experts, and everyone else who is interested" (Gemeente Smallingerland 2008) would help in the design[7]. Two goals were formulated for the development of the area: 1) to build a "neighbourhood for tomorrow", exceeding ordinary expectations for a middle-income residential area; and 2) an innovative planning and implementation process, including new financial and administrative constructions, to make this happen.

Performance

The Ideeënbus in Opeinde resulted in around 600 posts by nearly 160 individual participants. Out of these posts, about 150 were 'ideas' soliciting around 300 substantive reactions; the remaining messages had no substantive content. Seventy per cent of the contributors visited the website only once or twice and typically a posting would only evoke two reactions on average. Apparently, most bloggers were interested in advancing their own ideas and very little discussion ensued. Another striking result is that professional parties and environmental organisations remained virtually absent with respectively 4% and 1% of contributions, and essentially no innovative ideas have been suggested. Rather than ground-breaking, some ideas could be characterized as eccentric and therefor quite difficult to realize. Too few visitors and not the right kind of visitors, is considered to be the cause. Also, the phenomenon of participation inequality, which is prominent in online volunteer-based activity (Nielsen, 2006), had not been properly addressed. The latter effect is confirmed by findings in the participatory budgeting case in Dordrecht too (Naber and Enserink, work in progress).

Discussion

New media and open source strategies in combination with impact assessment has not been extensively studied yet. Most related studies either focus on web-based tools for E-government and E-governance, and mostly focus on electronic tools for service delivery and monitoring of policy and project implementation (e.g. Cavalcante de Menezes, et al. 2010).

No matter what perspective we take on the meaning of mobile communication, internet and social media on the internet and their impact on policy making, as impact assessment community we are facing the challenge of using these new media for organizing public participation processes and at the same time are confronted with a new phenomenon: the public has new means to organize itself. This leads us to wonder what the impact of new

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[6]   In 2000, Canadian gold mining firm Goldcorp made valuable geological survey data available to the public on their corporate website, offering a total of $575,000 in prize money for the best suggestions for high-grade gold exploration in the area. The Challenge website received more than 475,000 hits and more than 1,400 online prospectors from 51 countries registered as Challenge participants, eventually producing 110 targets, over 80% of which proved productive; yielding 8 million ounces of gold, worth more than $3 billion.

[7] http://www.ncsi.nl/nl/kennis/kennisbank/open-innovatie-bij-gemeente-smallingerland/854

media and the phenomenon of self-organizing publics will be on public policy making and public participation in impact assessment in special.

New media and public participation in impact assessment is a medal with two sides; the organizer/initiator side where new media are a resource and means for spreading information and soliciting feedback on plans and for organizing monitoring and follow-up by inviting the public to participate; the other side of the medal is the potential for self-mobilization of publics, which in itself may be considered a blessing but may also turn into hard to fight opposition.

Clearly, citizen participation is a process that needs to be designed purposefully so as to engage those who need to be involved in order to be effective and make a policy into a success. Different mechanisms for citizen participation serve to achieve different participatory goals and involve the creation of different publics (Braun and Schultz 2010; Felt and Fochler 2010). Public participation, therefore, is not only about objects, but also about subjects: who is participating and who needs to participate? It is a matter of constructing the right public. In the open source approach to public participation, however, individuals self-identify as a player in the process. This puts the burden on the organizer to define tasks in such a way that they attract the right kind of public as well as enough numbers to solve the problem at hand (Benkler 2002).

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