

Social Media In The Service of Civic Engagement

Today, Joe Peters of [Ascentum](#) and I led our session called "[Tech Savvy Citizenry](#)" at the [No Better Time conference](#) at the University of New Hampshire. We had a great turnout and there were people from across the spectrum of practitioners and institutions in the "deliberative democracy" movement.

[My post this morning described a quick thumbnail sketch of some social media tools](#) and categorized them very roughly. In our session, Joe and I highlighted a few tools and showed examples. I described my local blog, [Rockville Central](#), of course! Joe showcased a very interesting use of YouTube by [CDCStreamingHealth](#) as well as a new "soft-launched" Facebook application developed by Ascentum that [Speak Up For Change](#) is using.

Then we asked people to break into groups and respond using social media to a number of scenarios.

Here were the scenarios:

Local Health. You run a nonprofit health clinic in a rural resort area. The surrounding county is relatively poor. Over the last few years there's been a steady upsurge of obesity and obesity-related conditions such as diabetes. You have been speaking with a local community foundation about creating an education campaign about wellness and obesity.

No Truck With That. You are the Executive Director of a national environmental organization based in DC. Within an omnibus bill before the Senate, there is a provision that would remove emissions regulations on transport trucks and heavy equipment for five years with a chance to be renewed for another 5 years. The intent is to not overburden the fragile shipping and construction industries during this economic slowdown. You need to mobilize a national campaign to let senators know that this is an irresponsible approach that has long term implications for a short term benefit.

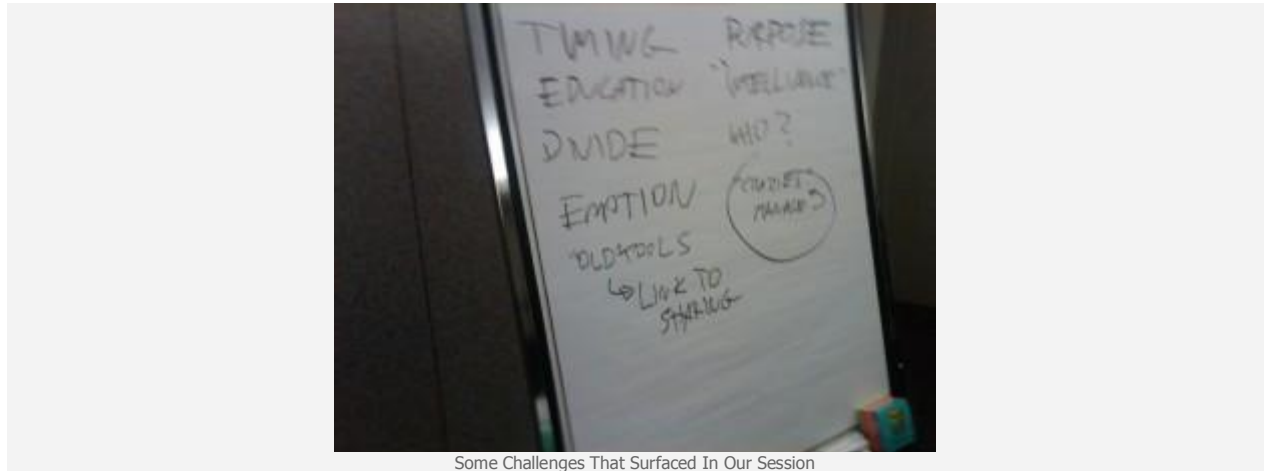
Senator Senior. You are a new Senator looking at establishing new legislation to protect seniors. It has come to your attention that seniors often face abuse in retirement homes, hospitals, and while in palliative care. You need to get input from citizens on their stories and experiences. You also want to hear about potential solutions to eliminating elder abuse.

Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything. You're chairperson of a citizens' association in a fancy part of town. A nonprofit real estate developer who specializes in affordable housing has purchased a parcel of land that's adjacent to your neighborhood. The developer's plan is to create a 4-story apartment building that includes subsidized housing. You know your members are vocal and have strong views running the gamut — from "not in my back yard" to "we should have more affordable housing." The developer has asked the association to help it understand what would and would not be acceptable to most in the community.

Welcome Home. You are a mayor of a small mid western city. It has come to your attention that many new policies are adversely affecting new Americans. You want to establish a sustained relationship with members of a new advisory committee, but don't always want to

wait till the next quarterly meeting. How can social media help maintain relations and gather input in between the meetings?

We asked people to discuss how they might use social media in each of these scenarios.



The responses ran the gamut. One group suggested that they could use blogs and a wiki to support a community-wide face-to-face dialogue — a sort of reporting and support mechanism. One group created an integrated strategy that gathered stories from people using YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook — creating a repository of stories. Another group crafted a campaign that was rooted in part in “old school” tools like e-mail (still perhaps the killer Internet application).

Of most interest to me were some of the challenges that the groups found they had to contend with. These are useful to keep in mind:

- **Timing:** At what point in the “life cycle” of the issue are you coming in? some issues have already developed to the point where people are taking positions and there is a lot of mistrust. That might not be the point to launch an input campaign because it will further harden the lines in the sand. Some issues are just developing, and social media tools can add to the dialogue.
- **Emotion:** People participate in the things that move them. In some circumstances, anger can be a powerful and positive motivator but it can also get in the way. How do you build emotion in (so people participate) but channel it (so people are constructive). Social media by itself can’t solve this dilemma.
- **Purpose:** This is related to timing, but it’s separate too. Some organizations are engaging citizens in the service of a broader advocacy campaign, while others are trying to get people to connect with one another. It’s straightforward to use social media to further a specific interest, but it can be a big challenge to build an initiative where people are interacting with one another without any mediating organization.
- **Divide:** The “digital divide” does exist. There are people who just aren’t online, or who are not comfortable being online. This gets laid on top of the familiar problems that civic engagement projects have of getting new people in the room who are not just the

“usual suspects.” Really effective social media uses will take that into account and use tried-and-true organizing techniques to draw people in. This takes sensitivity.

- **Norms:** People don't have a habit of civil discourse — at least, not everyone has that habit. Open social media tools can let in unhelpful voices as well as important yet previously unheard voices. While there are ways to help an online community self-police (for instance by allowing people to flag inappropriate postings), there's still got to be a human element making sure that norms get set and people are reminded of them.

We thought we might be able to create a framework for people to choose which tools match up with which purposes. With more time (like a whole conference), we might have been able to do that but instead we were able to surface questions like these.

Also important, though, is that people were pushed to interact with social media tools in concrete ways, rather than in the abstract. For some people, that seemed very useful. For others — who were more conversant already — this might have been rudimentary but they played important roles in their small groups in helping others understand how the tools could work.

I want to thank Matt Leighninger and Nancy Thomas for inviting me to be a part of this session, and Joe Peters for a great collaboration.