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Executive Summary

Social media’s role for facilitating communication amongst communities, both geographically and common interest groups continues to grow. The events in the spring of 2011 (also known as Arab Spring) in Egypt and the use of social media in the last presidential election in the United States of America are just a few examples of the power that such platforms as Facebook or Twitter can have for mobilizing the masses. Social media has enhanced the average user’s ability to exchange information and at a faster speed than has ever occurred before.

The use of social media for providing information and interacting with local communities is of interest to planners. However, social media’s use within formal institutions and corporations continues to raise questions like how it should be used and what policies need to be created for its incorporations. The larger question being answered is whether or not social media has a role in the planning process. The short answer is yes. Social media has been shown to engage local communities, especially members who otherwise cannot afford the time to engage within the process.

This report delves into the implications that social media has for planners. It builds upon existing methods of public consultation and explains the role that social media can play to enhance such methods. The end result is a compilation of recommendations for planners that relate to etiquette considerations and policy creation for the incorporation of social media into existing communication frameworks. At the end of the day, it is up to the individual planner to decide how he or she will use social media, when and to serve what purpose.

Methods

The methods used to create this report relied upon a sequential process. The first step in understanding social media’s role within the planning process was to conduct a literature review of the academic literature surrounding public consultation. The literature review is important because it is a key component for analyzing the findings from a content analysis of Hastings County’s Twitter feed (@hastingscounty) and their Social Media Strategic Plan (2009). The Twitter analysis and document review were analyzed against the findings from the literature review. An interview with The County’s Economic Development Officer (also a registered professional planner) was conducted in order to gain further insight into the use of social media within a professional capacity.

Although the report focuses in on the experience of Hastings County, the use of social media is generalizable. Although experience will differ from planner to planner, the recommendations are applicable to any planner considering the use of social media for public consultation purposes.

Literature Review

The literature has shown that public consultation emerged in the 1960’s in response to urban renewal process. As entire communities became threatened by urban renewal schemes, advocates such as Davidoff (1965) and Arnstein (1969) emerged to argue for greater forms of public participation. In the eyes of Davidoff (1965) planners needed to be more akin to pluralists, moving away from the technical position that had come to dominate the profession. Arnstein (1969) published her ever famous ladder of citizen participation. The ladder ranked the
various levels of public participation that were currently being carried out across the United States. Arnstein argued for greater participation of the public within the planning process.

The literature has also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of ‘traditional’ methods of participation. Public meetings, open houses, surveys, community advisory committees and neighbourhood organizations are commonly used methods to consult the public. However, their ability to elicit true forms of public participation is lacking. Doing away with these traditional methods of public consultation would be irrational, however, building upon the existing processes is necessary in order to improve the level of consultation that occurs with local community.

The literature has further gone on to show the role that social media is having on planners’ abilities to engage with local communities. Social media has proven itself to be cost-effective both in terms of financial costs and time costs; it reaches a broad demographic base, and removes the constraints of place from a fixed geographical location to one that is more ubiquitous and unfixed. However, social media is also limited due to access to the technology needed to run the different platforms, the lack of understanding of how to imbed social media into older institutions, and the ability for social media to polarize communities against a planning process.

Findings
The findings from the content analysis of Hastings County’s Twitter feed and Social Media Strategic Plan (2009) has proven that social media can be used to effectively engage the community. The Twitter analysis answered the following questions: 1. What type of information is being communicated?; 2. What hash tags (#) are being used?; and 3. Who are the tweets being directed towards?

In regard to the type of information that is being shared, six categories emerged: (1) local community and business promotion/awareness; (2) local festival promotion; (3) business advice and tips; (4) promotion of Hastings County; (5) tourism and (6) information on workshops/meetings/local events. Of particular interest to planners is the ability for social media to provide information on workshops, meetings and local events.

The findings of the keywords used in the hash tags allowed for specific communities to be targeted. This was particularly useful when an event or information session was occurring within a specific community. As well, key words related to economic development were widely used. This promoted specific types of businesses and industries that The County is known for. Similarly, planners can take advantage of these keywords to link to a broader discussion of a planning project or planning concept/idea.

The tweets in general were directed towards the larger online community that follows the Twitter feed. However, other pages such as @FABregion were tagged in order to link followers to that specific organizations Twitter page. This helps to increase the visibility of the FAB (food and beverage) Region, which is integral to the growth of culinary industry.

The document review of the strategic plan revealed six main categories for consideration when embarking on the social media journey. The categories were:
(1) What is social media?
(2) How does it fit into our Economic Development and Investment Attractions Strategy?
(3) Who is Hastings County?
(4) Communication Framework
(5) Goals and Measurements and
(6) Timelines and Benefits.

The strategic plan, which is internal to Hastings County’s economic development department, guides the use of social media for engaging with the local community. It effectively lays out how social media will be used and when, who they are targeting and what The County wishes to achieve through its use.

Analysis
The use of social media by Hastings County was shown to have the following impacts: it engages a variety of demographics, increases visibility, increases effective two-way communication, redefines the sense of ‘place’ and shifts the public consultation role of the planner from a reactionary to a proactive position.

Social media has been effective at increasing the visibility of The County’s activities and has made them a trendsetter in the use of social media in South Eastern Ontario. Social media has created new avenues for communication and the sharing of information. Followers vary depending on the different platforms used to engage the community, but understanding this can better help planners target their information to the different groups of followers. Social media has further allowed for The County to ask questions of the community and receive responses. Their experiences overall have been positive with no negative commentary. Moving forward it is recognized that planning decisions and the planning process are also contentious, as they can have a broader impact upon the community. Understanding this will help to mitigate the future tensions that can emerge and better help planners to address the concerns of citizens who are engaging with them on social media platforms.

Results and Recommendations
The recommendations were developed based upon the analysis of Hastings County’s Twitter feed, the document review of the strategic plan and the interview with the County’s Economic Development Officer.

Recommendations for Social Media Etiquette:
1. Create individual accounts
2. Take a team approach
3. Create a schedule
4. Keep it Appropriate
5. Timing
6. Responding
7. Takes Risks
8. Take Responsibility
Recommendations for Policy Creation
1. Outline what platforms you are going to use and how you are going to use them
2. Create a vision
3. Create goals and objectives
4. Measure through monitoring and evaluation
5. Establish rules and boundaries
6. Establish an information schedule/pre-approved message
7. Training
8. Timeline

The following recommendations are not restrictive, and in fact are a starting base for planners. By working with existing communication departments and other stakeholders planners can help ensure that all the necessary measures are put in place for the use of social media to engage with the local community.

Conclusion
Social media is a powerful tool that planners can use for public consultation purposes. The experiences of Hastings County’s economic development department have been overly positive and have helped to increase their activity amongst local communities and beyond. Social media has a role in facilitating means to gain community input into such undertakings as community improvement plans, downtown revitalization plans or larger developments that legislatively trigger the public participation process. Using social media can be time consuming, but with the proper framework and guidelines, and the mobility of technology, it can provide information at the click of a button.
Chapter 1. Introduction

Social media has had a large impact on the way that society communicates and shares information. From recent revolutions in countries like Egypt to gaining political support such as United States President Obama’s success at influencing younger generations to get out and vote, social media has a far reaching ability to mobilize the masses. Social media continues to grow in popularity, and so does its ability to spread information at a faster speed than ever before.

The use of social media for public engagement is a growing trend. Whether trying to influence the younger generation to get out and vote or to provide information on an upcoming event, community engagement through social media is just beginning to reach its potential. However, there remain many questions on the part of municipal governments and private corporations on how to incorporate social media into existing communication policies in order to interact with the local community and online population.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether or not there is a role for social media within the existing public consultation frameworks in planning. The report will consider existing public consultation methods and how social media can work in conjunction with these methods. The goal of the report is to develop a set of guidelines for etiquette and policy creation for planners to use when engaging the local community through social media.

Chapter Two, methods, lays out the research design that was undertaken to carry out this report. The methods detail the timeline of each of the steps within completing the report and lays out the ethical considerations needed to carry out research related to the interview process.

Chapter Three contains the literature review, which draws out the current methods used in public participation, weighing both the positives and pitfalls of each method. Reviewing existing methods and the gaps within them will help to determine where social media fits into the public consultation process. The benefits and drawbacks of social media will also be discussed in order to determine if it is an effective method for public consultation.

Chapter Four presents the findings of Hastings County’s Economic Development departments Social Media Strategic Plan and Twitter news feed analysis. A content analysis of their Twitter page over the course of four months was also conducted in order to better
understand how Twitter is used to engage with the local community. The findings consider how social media is used, what type of information is being provided, and why. This section also begins to consider the implication that social media has for planners when it comes to engaging with the local community.

Chapter Five uses the findings from the literature review and the strategic plan and Twitter analysis to analyze if social media is truly an effective approach to engage the public. Furthermore the results from an interview with Hastings County’s Economic Development Officer are considered within this section. The relevance of social media from a planner’s perspective is also considered here. Seeing as there are limited examples of planning departments that use social media to engage local communities (none were found by the researcher), the analysis draws upon the efforts put forth by Hastings County’s economic development department and consequently, the potential implications that social media could have for planners.

Chapter Six provides recommendations chapter builds upon the previous sections in regard to etiquette and policy creation for the use of social media. The recommendations are based upon the interview; literature and findings from the analysis of the Hastings County’s strategic plan and Twitter news feed. The recommendations are meant to act as a guide for planners who are considering using social media to engage the local community. Recommendations around etiquette are meant to provide general guidelines for the general use of social media. The recommendations around the creation of policy for the use of social media within a corporation or municipality is meant to help guide planners, communication departments and other stakeholders towards establishing social media as a form of public engagement.

Lastly, the concluding chapter brings together the ideas from the previous chapters and reinforces the role that social media has within the planning process. It considers both the positives and the negatives to the use of social media and the implications that it can have for engaging the community.
Chapter 2. Methods

The research methods used to create this report relies upon subsequent methods building onto each other in a linear sequential fashion. The methods include a sequence of a literature review to gain a background on public participation best practices in planning; a document review of a social media strategic plan; Twitter analysis of Hastings County’s Twitter feed; and a semi structured interview with a registered professional planner to help address gaps in the information.

Literature Review

The literature review outlines the following information: the importance of public participation, current best practices and the role for, and limitation of, social media in the context of public participation.

The literature review draws from a variety of academic literature and professional planning journals. The importance of public participation is analyzed to understand why it is important to the planning process beyond the legal obligation that is outlined in the Ontario Planning Act and various provincial planning legislation across Canada. It considers the historical implications of public participation and how participation processes have been perceived.

The literature review also analyzes the current best practices within public participation methods. Specifically, the review discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the different methods of participation. This helps to identify the current advantages of public participation methods currently in use as well as the weaknesses. The analysis of current best practices helps to identify whether or not there is a role for social media within the planning process for consultation purposes and what is entailed in this role.

Lastly, the literature review helps to tease out whether or not there is a role for social media within public consultation practices in planning. The literature helps to inform how social media is currently being used in not only a planning capacity, but within governmental structures as well. This helps to determine both the advantages and disadvantages to the use of social media and argue whether or not it is an appropriate mechanism with which to engage the public or various publics.
**Document Review**

Next, a review of the Hasting County’s *Social Media Strategic Plan (2009)* is undertaken. The Strategic Plan lays out the importance of social media and how it is relevant to the County. An analysis of the content within the strategic plan helps to inform how Hastings County is using social media to engage with the local community both in terms of etiquette and internal policy creation. The analysis of the strategic plan further draws out how planners can use social media to engage with the local community.

**Twitter Analysis**

A content analysis of Hasting County’s Economic Development ‘tweets’ helps to determine how the County uses *Twitter* to interact with the public. A content analysis approach is used as there are no existing approaches to analyzing *Twitter* tweets. An approach to content analysis will help draw out existing themes within the tweets and help to determine how *Twitter* is being used by Hastings County to interact and provide information with the public. (A tweet is a unit of text that is no more than 140 characters long; when posting information onto *Twitter*, the information or post is considered a ‘tweet’). Specifically, the content analysis categorizes the tweets based upon the following questions:

1. What type of information is being communicated?
2. What hash tags (#) are being used?
3. Who are the tweets being directed towards?

The themes and information drawn from the *Twitter* analysis will help to inform how municipalities can use *Twitter* to interact with the public through social networking.

**Interview**

In order to conduct the interview, an ethics review was submitted and approved. The single interview was conducted in order to validate the data that was collected through the literature review, document review and *Twitter* analysis. The interview took place on April 19, 2012 with Andrew Redden, Hasting County’s Economic Development Officer. Consent was given to both interview and identify Redden within this report. The interview is useful in filling in gaps in the information that was not available in the literature review. Furthermore, the interview provides information on Hastings County’s use of social media that may not be apparent through the analysis of the content on the *Twitter* website. Since the County uses a
variety of social media platforms outside of Twitter, the interview was also used to gain additional information on how the different platforms are used. In part, it is also used to help create potential solutions or identify other people or departments where discussions may have to take place. The interview offers further insight into the professional use of social media and its implications for planners in terms of community engagement.

Through the interview, specific problems that can arise through the use of social media within a professional capacity and for governmental use will be addressed. This will help identify potential solutions as well as other departments or bodies of people that will need to be involved through the implementation of social media. Furthermore, the information from the interview will further help to generate recommendations on both etiquette and policy creation for social medias use by a professional planner.

**Generalizability of Findings**

Social media has become a significant facet within the public realm. Municipalities, private firms, government agencies and individual planners are questioning the role that social media can play within their professional careers. This report is generalizable to all planners as the public continues to turn to social media outlets to voice their concerns, ideas and opinions about planning related issues. Although this report looks at Hastings County’s use of social media to provide information to and interact with the public, lessons and best practice recommendations can easily be drawn out at a higher level. Although experience will differ from one planner to another, the results and recommendations within this report are applicable to anyone questioning and investigating the use of social media within a professional capacity.

**Researcher Bias**

I am an avid proponent for the use of social media, however I understand the hesitation that municipalities and planners have about incorporating it into their professional realm. As a researcher, I argue that planners need to adapt and incorporate new means of communicating with the public. I personally feel that current public participation methods are effective but not efficient. I feel that there needs to be more innovative methods of consultation with the public that need to be considered and incorporated into current practices.

In order to mitigate researcher bias the interview process was used to help gain insight into the use of social media for community engagement. My intention as researcher was to ensure that the my opinions are not the dominant voice within the report and that the experiences
and expert opinions of professionals currently utilizing social media are at the forefront of the conversation as much as possible.

**Limitations**

The scope of this report is limited in scale. Only Hastings County’s use of Twitter was analyzed, which may make the findings appear limited in scope. Social media is currently a popular form of communication and as the literature review will show, can have far reaching outcomes. The incorporation of social media into the planning process to engage local communities is becoming a relevant topic within planning departments, both in public institutions and private firms. Therefore the experiences of Hastings County although unique are easily generalizable. There are many counties, especially within their tourism and economic development departments, which heavily utilize social media to interact with the public (I.e., Muskoka Tourism, Explore the Bruce, and Bruce Grey Simcoe are examples of tourism organizations using Twitter to engage with the local community and tourists alike). This makes the use and study of social media for use by planners applicable to almost everyone.
Chapter 3. Literature Review

Public participation is supposed to provide the local citizenry with an opportunity to comment and become involved within the planning process. Public consultation is a legislated requirement for all levels of government in regard to the planning process. Its emergence began in the 1960’s and was highlighted by the works of Sherry Arnstein (1969) and Paul Davidoff (1965) to name two key proponents during this era. The recognition that planning decisions need to be made through proper participation channels with the general public creates a new dimension for planners. However, the public consultation process remains the same since it was first legislatively mandated. This literature review looks at the emergence of public consultation and how its influence on the planning process. A discussion surrounding current best practices is discussed in order to identify gaps within the current process. Lastly a discussion about the potential for social media to fill in the gaps will be presented by weighing both the pros and cons for its use by professional planners.

Emergence of Public Consultation

Public consultation’s emergence occurred during a turbulent time within the United States and Canada. The rise of advocacy planning was influenced by social protest and political turbulence in the 1960s (Checkoway, 1994; 140). The era in which Arnstein (1969) and Davidoff (1965) were advocating was one of the urban renewal. The razing and removal of entire communities, led to public outcry. The public called for a process that would see greater advocacy on their behalf and for greater public participation within the planning and decision-making process. It was during this era that planners were akin to technical experts who worked outside the realm of politics, advised decision makers without promoting particular policy positions, and prepared ‘master plans’ with singular solutions to urban problems (Checkoway 1994; 140). The dimension that was missing within the practice of planning was one that facilitated a mutual interaction between the planner/public official and the people for which they planned.

Arnstein’s “A Ladder for Citizen Participation (1969), set out the framework for the different levels of participation. Arnstein identified eight ‘rungs’ of the ladder ranging from forms of public manipulation up to full-blown citizen control. Arnstein argued that equitable and fair public participation was a “distribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently
excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future” (216). The redistribution of power, especially on the upper rungs of the ladder, was an important facet in order to achieve true public participation within the planning process. Furthermore, public participation is the strategy by which people who feel or are not powerful, join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out (216). The public, therefore, was to be seen as another piece of the puzzle (the biggest piece of the puzzle) within the decision-making process. However, as will be seen in both the history and current best practices, methods of public participation still continue to be controversial based upon the lack of true consultation with the local citizenry.

Davidoff (1965) in his pivotal piece “Advocacy Planning” redefined the role of the individual planner within the planning process. According to Davidoff, planners should be able to engage in political processes as advocates of the interests of both government and of such other groups, organizations, or individuals who are concerned with proposing policies for the future development of the community (279). Through this, the planner could ensure the incorporation of the public within the planning process. Davidoff argues that “inclusion” means not only permitting the citizen to be heard, it also means that he or she should be able to become well informed about the underlying reasons for planning proposals and be able to respond to them in the technical language of professional planners (280). Not only should planners advocate for the public, but educate the public in order for them to participate within the process with the knowledge of the systems in which planners work. Advocacy planning shifted the onus on the planner from creating singular plans to incorporating a wider scope within their daily lives. Advocacy planning also called for the planner to shift away from their technical understanding of planning issues and begin to incorporate personal and wider societal values into the planning process.

The criticisms of public participation during this time focused around the reactionary nature of citizen engagement. Davidoff (1965) commented that the difficulty with current citizen participation programs is that citizens are more often reacting to agency programs than proposing their concepts of appropriate goals and future action (277). Public participation was further exacerbated due to its technical nature, such as the language and terminology used within planning reports. Reynolds (1969) argued that it was extremely difficult for the general public to
grasp the problems that planners are attempting to solve (133). Not only was it difficult to engage the public due to their lack of knowledge, Reynolds too supports the argument that public participation during the 1960’s was often reactionary: “In effect, much American participation is citizen opposition with planning agencies being forced to consult with the community organizations, which have arisen out of the bitter experiences of post-war redevelopment” (142). As will be demonstrated these criticisms of public participation are still prevalent within modern planning practices.

**Current Best Practices**

The definition and meaning of the public participation process has evolved since this process emerged as a legal requirement for most planning decisions. Modern day understanding of what public participation is reflects the fundamental values illustrated by Arnstein and Davidoff. Participation is understood as the “mechanisms intentionally instituted by government to involve the lay public, or their representatives, in administrative decision-making” (Shaw and Laurian, 2009; 294). Public participation also goes beyond the individual citizen. According to Innes and Booher (2004) participation must be collaborative and it should incorporate not only citizens, but also organized interests, profit-making and non-profit organizations, planners and public administrators in a common framework where all are interacting and influencing one another and all are acting independently in the world as well (422). Public participation should no longer be viewed as a singular process, but as a collaborative effort. Collaborative planning moves away from planning as being a policy driven, coordinative, knowledge rich and future oriented approach. Collaborative planning moves away from governance processes through the ‘unitary’ plan developed in ‘public interest’ toward a more inclusive public consultation process (Healey 2006; 231). The overall understanding of what public participation is and how it should be carried out continues to challenge planners and decision makers alike. Different methods of participation will create different levels of engagement from informing the public to a more meaningful form of collaboration.

The following participation methods were identified due to the frequency in which they are used within planning processes and their prevalence within current public participation literature. The following methods for public consultation will be discussed in order to gain an understanding of what currently is working and to identify existing gaps within common
consultation processes: public meetings and open houses, surveys, advisory committees and neighbourhood organizations.

Public Meetings and Open Houses

Public meetings and open houses are one of the most basic forms of public participation within the planning process. It is the minimum requirement that provincial legislation requires planners to carry out. For instance, the Ontario Planning Act requires public meetings and/or open houses to be held due to the creation of an official plan, the subdivision of land, land use controls and other items (Planning Act, RSO 1990, c P.13). The public meeting, at its core, informs citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation (Arnstein 1969; 219). Furthermore, public meetings are the easiest way to engage the local citizenry. Public meetings allow for the direct participation of amateurs or non-experts in the decision-making processes as well as allow for face-to-face interaction over an extended period of time (McComas, 2001; 39). If conducted properly, public meetings can become a form of a two-way exchange (but as will be discussed below, this may not always be the case) between the public and elected officials/planners. Open houses operate a lot like a public meeting, however they allow for information to be displayed through more visual forms of media such as posters and display models. Open houses can be effective at providing information ahead of a public meeting. It gives the public a chance to engage and ask questions of planners and the proponents of a project.

Although the most common form of participation, there are many drawbacks of using public meetings and/or open houses for public participation. The ordinary citizen is most likely to participate in public [meetings] in local arenas, where their interests are most clearly affected and where they are most knowledgeable (Innes and Booher, 2009; 423). Therefore, people are less like to participate when an issue has no direct bearings on their lives. Secondly, meetings/open houses tend to emphasize simple one-way forms of communication that merely provide citizens with information in order to educate them to accept a decision that already has been made (Conroy and Gordon, 2004; 20). Public meetings are often held later in the decision making process and are perceived to be informing the public when a final decision has already been made. This creates a process that is often vexatious unresponsive to the questions and concerns of the public. Public meetings and open houses, given their positive and negative merits, still continue to be the most popular form of public participation. Their ability to
facilitate face to face interaction with local officials and to learn more about a proposed project make it an effective method at presenting and discussing planning issues. However, issues around the timing of public meetings and open houses and the general sentiment that is viewed towards the process as being vexatious leave a lot to be desired when consulting with the public.

**Surveys**

Surveys are a simple and often cost-effective way in garnering public opinion on an issue. A survey can gage community reaction to a proposed planning decision or probe for information on what the general public would like to see in the future for the neighbourhood, city or municipality in which they live. Surveys can also be representative of the wider population. A major advantage of citizen surveys is that a scientifically selected random sample of the population can obtain an accurate representation of the views of all types of people (Milbrath 1981; 482, Rowe and Frewer, 2000; 9). Surveys have the potential to involve the wider population beyond the few people who typically attend open houses and public hearings. Surveys can also be easily accessible to the general population. Surveys are not only economically efficient, but they are also efficient in terms of time. Surveys are a single event, which usually last no more than several minutes (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; 9). Therefore, surveys make it easier for the general population to participate. Methods to encourage participation in surveys can include offering prizes to participants (i.e. having a draw for a prize). Conducting surveys as a form of public participation can be effective in enabling planners to gather information from affected populations.

Surveys also have pitfalls in the context of public participation. Surveys can be coercive. Formal and structured surveys can be biased and ask leading questions that could intentionally (or unintentionally) sway the public towards one answer over another. Furthermore, surveys take away the ability of the planner to be able to conduct a face-to-face exchange. Therefore information is only moving one way, with the planner receiving information from the public but leaving no room for the public to make inquiries. Surveys also limit access to resources that would enable participants to make good decisions, and as such outputs may reflect biases and misunderstandings that cannot be resolved (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; 21). Another issue with using surveys for public participation is that they can be costly in terms of distribution. Widely-distributed public surveys that are sent out by mail can cost thousands of dollars to administer and analyze. However, computer technology is making this method of participation cost-effective by allowing planners to administer surveys online. Analytical technology is also effective at analyzing the incoming data. Lastly, surveys may not truly be representational of the larger public. Barriers to completing surveys, such as illiteracy or lack of knowledge on the subject may marginalize
certain groups within a community by gaining only the input of those who are literate, if not, well-educated and aware of planning issues within their community. Surveys can be effective at allowing the public to participate within the planning process; however, the lack of interaction to gain further information or to clarify misunderstandings make surveys less effective than methods such as public meetings or open houses.

Citizen Advisory Committees

Citizen advisory committees have the ability for the public to participate and ‘power-share’ with local planners. Such committees can be established to deal with certain planning issues within a community. Extensive efforts are made in citizen advisory committees to provide public participants with the appropriate resources to make good decisions (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; 22). Therefore, those serving on the committee are well informed about the planning decisions and community issues that are at hand. Not only are committees effective at providing information on community matters, they also require face-to-face interactions among citizens, encouraging deliberation and public engagement on community issues (Rebori, 2011; 87). Higher levels of public participation are perceived to occur at this level. Committees are also influential for: educating public agencies about broad community attitudes, educating citizens about proposed actions, increasing the likelihood of community acceptance for proposed actions and simplifying public participation for government and industry to deal with a small body of citizens rather than an entire community (Rebori, 2011; 87-88).

Committees can allow for greater public participation and can facilitate the sharing of power between the local community and local planners, however, they can also become another form of placation. Citizen advisory committees, according to Arnstein (1969), can be another mechanisms in which planners and local officials placate the local citizens. Arnstein (1969) argues that this placation strategy is to “place a few hand-picked ‘worthy’ poor on boards of Community Action Agencies or on public bodies like the board of education, police commission, or housing authority” (220). Furthermore, participation on an advisory committee is very costly in terms of time. Serving on a local board requires a significant amount of time, effort and skill level as members are expected to engage in public deliberation, deal with community conflict, and forward recommendations to decision makers (Rebori, 2011; 88). As was the case for public hearings and open houses, only those who are truly interested in or facing impacts of a planning proposal are likely to participate. Citizen advisory committees therefore can lead to the same misrepresentation of the public, with the general public being less likely to participate due to the
heavy time costs, lack of knowledge about the issue, or lack of accessibility for participation. Although citizen advisory committees have the ability to share power with local planning authorities, they can still act as mechanisms of placation of the public and can misrepresent affected populations.

*Neighbour Organizations*

Neighbourhood organizations are based at the most localized level: in the community in which an individual lives. Neighbourhood organizations have emerged as a form of public participation that directly address planning issues at the scale of neighbourhoods. These organizations can have a tremendous impact on the planning process when organized efficiently. Checkoway (1985) argues that participation in neighbourhood organizations can increase the participants’ feelings of confidence, efficacy and power; increase identification with community, social interaction among residents and motivation for mutual aid and help behaviour; and contribute to organizational growth, leadership development and capacity for solving problems (475). As argued by Davidoff (1965), it might be desirable to commence plural planning at the level of citywide organizations, but a more realistic view is that it will start at the neighborhood level (334). Planning related issues that impact a particular neighbourhood are best addressed at the neighbourhood scale. However, unless included within the planning process earlier to mitigate strong opposition, NIMBYism may be the driving force behind such organizations to prevent development or planning proposals from going ahead.

Neighbourhood organizations are effective when there is a mutual shared power with the municipality and/or planning organization. As illustrated in Arnstein’s ladder, this degree of citizen control can lead to high levels of co-operation and effectiveness in the planning process. However, neighbourhood organizations have the ability to be exclusionary at best. Neighbourhood organizations can lack the technical and professional expertise and knowledge needed to make sound and rational planning decisions. It is difficult to make plans involving neighbourhood issues when residents are unaware of inequities or discrepancies in services, approach the neighbourhood as isolated individuals or know little about the neighbourhood as a planning unit (Checkoway 1985; 477). Citizen control, according to Arnstein (1969) is incompatible with merit systems and professionalism; and ironically enough, it can turn out to be a game for the have-nots by allowing them to gain control but not allowing them sufficient dollar resources to succeed (223). Neighbourhood organizations and citizen control can be effective at
engaging the local citizenry with the planning process; however, it can be an exclusionary process including only those who have the influence or technical knowledge to be able to participate.

**The Role for Social Media**

Social media is capable of filling in the gaps that exist within traditional public participation methods. People are increasingly using mobile social networks to transform the ways they come together and interact in public space (Humphreys, 2010; 764). Social media encompasses a wide range of online media such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Blogs, Flickr and many more. Each social media site has its own attributes that make it user friendly. For the remainder of the discussion on social media, the focus will be placed upon the use of Facebook and Twitter, as these two social media websites are the most conventionally utilized by the general public. Facebook allows for users to create personal profiles and post status updates and share information with self-created networks of friends, family and acquaintances. Twitter is a micro-blog site that allows users to follow a variety of people, companies, government organizations and groups; information is shared by posting information in 140 characters or less.

**Advantages over Traditional Methods of Participation**

There are many benefits to using social media as a form of public participation. What is important to note at this stage is that social media is not the singular and best answer to engaging the public. Web-based public participation is an effective and affective complementary means for public participation, but it cannot yet replace traditional unmediated techniques (Stern et al. 2009; 1083). Traditional methods of public participation (i.e. face-to-face interaction) will remain an important facet of public participation due to the unresolved issues that exist through the use of social media (as will be discussed below). Using a combination of traditional methods and incorporating social media into everyday planning practice may enhance the level of and capacity for public engagement, however this has yet to be seen.

There are many advantages to using social media in light of already established participation methods. First of all, participation on the Internet exerts a positive influence on political participation, even independent of civic participation (Weber et al. 2003; 39). Social media offers a variety of ways for people to become informed about local issues that matter to them. Weber et. Al (2003) also found that Internet communication forums have been most successful at enhancing participation at the local level (28). Not only is there a wider influence on participation at the local level, but social media can also help increase the knowledge base of
local citizens. Technology-based approaches to public meetings can lead to greater knowledge, commitment, and satisfaction levels than traditional public meetings (Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; 399). Social media improves the ability of an individual person to learn about an issue and participate within the planning process in a more timely and effective manner. This is due to ability to share information at a faster speed. Social media can be used to provide links to planning reports and more detailed information. The following areas in which social media are a benefit to the planning process will be discussed in greater detail: cost-effectiveness, demographic reach, overcoming the physical geography of space and the creation of social capital. The discussion will end with the limitations of social media in the context of public participation.

**Cost Effective**

There are many benefits to using social media within the planning process to engage citizens. One of the driving factors that make it an attractive avenue for engagement is that it is cost effective in terms of both monetary resources and time. The Internet holds the potential to engage the previously disengaged by reducing the costs associated with obtaining political information and by increasing the opportunities for online engagement (O’Neill, 2010; 40). Social media websites are free to join and free to use. Information can be replicated online for relatively little or no cost. Only a limited subset of citizens will ever participate in a full-fledged way, spending months or years in meetings, but many more can participate in one-time workshops and large dialogues (Innes and Booher, 2004; 430). The advantage to using social media is that members of the community can follow planning issues that may take months or years to sort out online without having to give up large portions of their time to attend meetings or obtain information. Mandarano (2010) states that:

> Today, as planners increasingly use Internet-based technologies to distribute information about the planning process and to make information available 24/7, it is much easier for a constituent to follow and to engage in the process. Additionally, as more cities enable the use of interactive technologies (wikis, e-mail, Web feedback, etc.), constituents who previously were unable to participate in time-intensive and geography-specific activities, now can participate from remote locations and when convenient (132).

By providing online access earlier within the planning process, planners can help citizens to be informed of the planning decisions to be taken within their community. This access helps to
foster a participation process that is more equitable and timely, while reducing the spatial, geographical and time barriers that can prevent people from participating.

Demographics

One of the main concerns that planners and professionals have about the use of social media are the demographic characteristics of those who use social media. There is a common misconception that only those who are young and educated use social media on a daily basis. Although younger people are more likely to use social networking, over the past few years, older generations are flocking to social networking sites and quickly becoming the fastest growing group of social network users (Turner-Lee 2010; 23). The same trend is also being reflected among Canadian users of social media.

With the lowest voter turnout, youth and young adults are the least likely to become civically engaged. The lack of interest and time to become involved within political processes make youth the least represented in electoral votes and in public participation methods. Social media is capable of bridging this gap and can effectively encourage civic engagement and incorporate the values and opinions of the younger generations. For example, young supporters of President Obama, especially under the age of thirty, used social networking sites to inspire their peers to vote, resulting in more than twenty million young people participating in the 2008 election, an increase of 3.4 million compared to 2004 (Turner-Lee 2010; 20). Social media can be used to reach out to groups who have previously been disengaged within the political and consultation process. Going to where the people are may be a simple and effective approach to public engagement that can expand the idea of the people coming to the planner for information.

Shifting Idea of Place from fixed to ubiquitous

Social media allows people to participate regardless of their geographic location. Social media requires shifting the idea of place from a fixed location to one that is more ubiquitous. Turner-Lee (2010) states that new technologies are shifting the core of communities from physically fixed and bound groups to wider and mobile social networks (22). Social networks exist over larger spans of time and space and are not limited to defined geographic areas. Furthermore Weber et. al (2003) argue that: “interactive communication mechanisms and discussion forums enhance the level of public discourse on community issues and can increase involvement in public affairs. Online communication forums, therefore, offer public space for deliberation and delivery of political information” (28). Public discussion is moving away from
the traditional coffee shop or town hall style of conversation where groups of people physically come together in a physical space to discuss the issues within their community. The creation of a new ‘third space’ through online interaction is making social media an effective means to communicate and engage with local citizenry. Connectivity, especially the power of the Internet, does not overshadow the importance of place or geography; it rather creates new important nodes and particular spaces in global networks (Mandarano, 2010; 125).

Creation of Social Capital

Social media has the ability to create and facilitate social capital. A more recent definition put forth by Robert Putnam, defines social capital as the “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust-worthiness that arise from them” (Mandarano, 2010; 124, see also Putnam 1995). Social capital is the ability to foster and generate bonds between individuals with common interests or people who live within a geographical area such as a neighbourhood. Mandarano (2010) further suggests that social capital can facilitate information sharing to arrive at mutual understanding leading to conflict resolution, more effective decision-making, more efficient coordination, and increased capacity to respond to future challenges (124-5). Social media’s ability to create networks in which information can be exchanged and lead to greater understanding of issues that impact a municipality and can help planners and the local citizenry alike respond to future challenges that face a municipality.

The real-time or immediate factor, which many social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter offer, allow for issues to be dealt with in that moment. On the whole, the use of social media has created an increase in civic engagement within local communities. Evans-Cowley and Hollander (2010) found that citizens may not even realize that they are engaged in a planning process when they ‘friend’ a planning group on Facebook, but by doing so they are increase planning awareness among their networks (398). Social media has created a vast network where information and civic action are taking on new roles. Via Twitter, people are able to ‘tweet’ their stance on an issue, ‘like’ in support or against a specific cause or proposal or sign an online petition by simply clicking a button and typing their name; and mobile devices are only making this easier to do so. Humphrey (2010) argues that people are increasingly accessing networks of friends or potential friends through their mobile phones. Much like social network sites on the Internet, new mobile social networks can be used to build and reinforce social ties.
The creation of a new public space in the online realm can broaden a planner’s ability to connect and share information with others, and continue to create, shape and influence social capital.

_Limitations to Social Media_

There are limitations to the use of social media similar to those experienced by traditional participations methods. The problems that exist within social media can be addressed through the continued use of traditional methods. One of the concerns about using social media, and which this report hopes to address, is the challenge of imbedding new technologies and methods into existing and older institutions (Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; 399). There are still many questions, even in light of the benefits of social media, on how to incorporate these methods into the existing participation framework set out by corporate structures. Of most concern is how to develop appropriate guidelines for social media etiquette and policy creation. Madarano’s (2010) survey of planning agencies that use digital technology revealed that while 95 percent of planning agencies in the United States surveyed have an Internet presence, the agencies are using digital technologies to engage in e-services such as broadcasting information, with less emphasis on citizen interaction (130). Although municipalities and corporations are using web-based technology to provide information, they are falling short of fully reaching its potential for interacting with the public through social media platforms.

Another concern expressed in the literature is in direct relation to the demographics of those who use social media. The more educated, holding academic and managerial positions, in their 30s to 40s, are those who use the web as an additional opportunity for active and affective participation (Stern et al. 2009; 1083). Furthermore, Weber et. Al (2003) argued it is more likely that the Internet will continue to be exploited by elites. Therefore, increased and equal access to technological communication is necessary to come closer to reaching the Internet’s democratic potential (29). Although there is a wider breadth of the population that is accessing and using social media as part of their day-to-day lives (as demonstrated earlier), there is still a gap between age cohorts who access social media as a form of public participation. However, knowing who uses social media and why they do while considering the demographic base, planners who engage the public on these forums can more appropriately target specific age groups.
Not only is the demographic composition of who uses social media a concern, but also
the lack of accessibility of groups have to new technologies. Unequal access to the Internet
affects civic engagement when groups are underrepresented or on the periphery of online activity
(Turner-Lee, 2010; 21). Furthermore, Mandarano (2010) argues that:

“concerns include for example whether Internet-based methods of
communication reach a broader audience, which is of particular concern for
poorer populations that may not have access to a computer or the Internet. In
the interim, planners may need to double their efforts to engage typically
disenfranchised populations” (132).

Access to technology is based upon a person’s ability to purchase the technological devices that
support the platforms on which social media is most commonly supported or being able to access
public resources such as computers at a local library or Internet café. Using social media without
considering the groups of people who do not have equitable access to such technologies will only
continue to marginalize certain members within the community. Other concerns such as a
person’s ability to use new technologies is also an issue that needs to be addressed when
incorporating social media into existing methods of participation.

Lastly, the use of social media in large part is to oppose proposed plans or development.
Most citizen-initiated groups are organized to oppose a development proposal or plan (80%)
(Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; 401). Planners need to seize the opportunity to engage the
local citizens and not in a reactionary manner. In a study of the use of Facebook for urban
planning issues, Evans-Cowley and Hollander (2010) observed that government-initiated sites
had on average 29 ‘friends,’ while the citizen- initiated sites had an average of 297 ‘friends’
(401). Similar to the formation of public opposition groups within a community, social media
fora such as Twitter and Facebook are making planning issues more prevalent, on a larger and
broader scale.

Social media has the ability to galvanize a community into action and engage those who
otherwise would not participate in traditional public participation methods. Social media will
continue to revolutionize the way in which planners and decision makers interact with the public.
Understanding how to use social media is an important aspect for planners to grasp and requires
an in-depth analysis on current best practices in terms of social media etiquette and policy
creation within corporate structures.
Chapter 4. Findings

Hastings County is located in Eastern Ontario and encompasses a large area bordering the Bay of Quinte in the south and Algonquin Park in the North. Hastings County (also referred to as ‘The County’) includes the City of Belleville and smaller towns such as Tweed, Marmora, Bancroft, Madoc and Stirling. The County is predominantly rural with a population of 38 960 (not including Quinte West and the City of Belleville which are approximately 90 000 people). The County bolsters a variety of economic activity and is well known for its local cheese, wine and beer industries. The County is also in the process of establishing themselves as a region for the arts, culture and tourism, especially with regard to culinary tourism (Hastings County, 2012).

Image 4.1 Hastings County’s in relation to Eastern Ontario. Source: County of Hastings
**Twitter Analysis**

A content analysis was carried out on Hastings County’s Economic Development’s Twitter feed. Using the user name of @hastingscounty, tweets that published between October 1st, 2011 and January 31st, 2012 were recorded and analyzed. The four-month range allowed for a wide breadth and diversity of tweets to be captured and for the researcher to obtain a bigger snapshot of how Hastings County’s economic development department uses Twitter.

Hash tags are keywords within a tweet that are preceded by the number sign (#). When a word is hash tagged, the tweeter is taken to another page that contains all tweets that used that hash tag. For instance if you clicked on #business, you would be redirected to a page that contained tweets that used the hash tag #business, opening up to a wider range of tweeters. Hash tags are also used to determine trends within Twitter. For instance, if enough people use the hash tag #business, it will become a trend. Trends can be viewed from both a local level (such as a city) to a national and world level.

Hash tags also provide common themes within the tweets. Chart 1 in Appendix A provides a detailed break down of the key words used over the four-month collection period. The chart provides the word and the number of times it was mentioned in the form of a hash tag.

The following questions were considered when analyzing the tweets:
1. What type of information is being communicated?
2. What hash tags (#) are being used?
3. Who are the tweets being directed towards?

### 1. What type of information is being communicated?

A variety of themes emerged over the four-month tweeting period as to the purposes of the tweets. Six main types of information emerged: (1) local community and business promotion/awareness; (2) local festival promotion; (3) business advice and tips; (4) promotion of Hastings County (5) tourism and (6) information on workshops/meetings/local events.

**Local Community and Business Promotion/Awareness**

The largest theme that emerged through the tweets was the support of local business and community achievements, services and events. For instance the highlighting of a local Stirling entrepreneur who had appeared on *Dragons Den* ([www.cbc.ca](http://www.cbc.ca)) was tweeted on January 31st, 2012. The tweet provided a link to the article that featured the entrepreneur. Tweets about new businesses highlighted the work that The County was doing to support the establishment of local
businesses. The grand opening of A Little Taste of Paradise (a new restaurant establishment) was tweeted on a few occasions that included pictures, links to their website and a video.

Tweets were also used to highlight what the tweeter was doing at that moment. The tweets highlighted a meal that the person who posted the tweet (i.e. The Tweeter) was enjoying at a local restaurant, or an event they were attending at a local business. For example, it was tweeted on October 27, 2011: ‘Lunch Break! Split pea soup w/ a peppermint tea to warm me up (@The_Rural_Roots_Cafe), followed by a link to the Café’s website.

Hastings County is working towards making itself known as an artist community. This has manifested itself in the creation of their Arts Route throughout the County. Twitter is being utilized to not only promote the local arts route, but to highlight the talents and achievements of local artists and to promote the support of local business. On January 11th, 2012 it was retweeted from @ArtsRoute: “Calling all #artists! Sat Jan 19 join John M Parrott Art Gallery for the launch of a new program: ‘The Drawing Room’”. The tweet was then followed by a link to provide further information about the event. During the holiday season (December to January) tweets were also used to support the work of local artists. It was re-tweeted from @shoplocally: “Support local arts, artists & artisans this holiday season. Support Creativity in your community #ShopLocal”. Twitter is being effectively put to use in this circumstance to make followers aware of what is going on in the local arts world and how they can be supported.

In Hastings County the big industries revolve around the processing and creation of fine cheeses, wines and beers. Tweets were used not only to highlight different businesses dealing with these three consumables, but to provide information on how a person can establish their own wine, cheese or beer business. On December 1st, 2011 it was tweeted “Start your #Cheese making #business for $25 000 @FABregion”. FAB region is Ontario’s food and beverage region that is centralized within the Hastings, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington, and Prince Edward County area. The tweet links to the Twitter page of FAB region for those interested in receiving further information. Furthermore, Twitter is being utilized to highlight the opening of new wineries in the area. On October 26th, 2011 it was tweeted ‘Winery opening 2013 in @HastingsCounty’ followed by a link to the article highlighting the new winery. The use of Twitter effectively promotes and provides information on the local food and beverage industry within the region.
Local Festival Promotion

Twitter is also being used to promote local festivals, essentially helping to bolster tourism to the area. The Craft Beer festival in Stirling-Rawdon received a lot of Twitter attention leading up to, during, and after the event occurred. Tweets were used to indicate updates on the planning of the event (October 5th, 2011), and promote a contest to win two free tickets to the festival (October 14th, 2011) to providing pictures during the event (October 16th, 2011). The use of Twitter to provide real-time updates of the event was beneficial as those following on Twitter could access a list of local wines, cheeses and beers available at the event, see pictures posted by the tweeter, and virtually attend the event. The use of Twitter to promote the event was effective as it provided followers to win tickets to the event, identify where they could purchase tickets ahead of time and to read about what was going on at the event.

Business Advice/Tips

Twitter was also used to provide information about running a business and provided links to resources related to business. For instance, on October 19th, 2011, it was tweeted ‘Consider in food industry; materials, equipment, location, pricing, promotion & costing. Enterprise Facilitation’ followed by a link to the resource. On November 28th, 2011 it was tweeted ‘The entrepreneur always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity – Peter F. Drucker.’. The provision of resources related to business helps makes those businesses that follow @HastingsCounty aware of what is available online to help them improve their current operation. It also begins to create Hastings County’s Twitter page as a resource in itself as it continues to add Internet resources and business tips or ideologies to their page.

Promotion of Hastings County

Twitter is also useful in promoting the achievements of Hastings County and the economic development department. For instance, it was tweeted on November 4th, 2011 that ‘We helped open this #business. Look for their official launch later this month’ (followed by a link). Twitter was also used to promote Hastings as the next Wellness Destination (on numerous occasions). On November 18th, 2011 it was tweeted ‘We just obtained business data showing 110 businesses opened in our County between 2009 & 2011!’ Highlighting such achievements within the County denotes the success that they are having in attracting and maintaining new businesses and jobs within the region, again helping to promote it as a desirable community to establish a business in.
Tourism

Tourism promotion was another important aspect of the tweets. The County’s proximity to the Greater Toronto Area, the Ottawa region and the United States make it a desirable area for vacationers to visit. The establishment and promotion of the tourism industry is important; therefore, specific information through Twitter is provided in order to promote the tourism industry, and to provide information to tourism businesses to aid in self-promotion. One such way was to promote tourism meetings within the region such as was tweeted on December 6th, 2011. Twitter was also used to encourage local tourism business operators to become involved with establishing the region as a tourist destination. It was tweeted on November 22nd, 2011 ‘Hastings County’s Premier-ranked Tourist Destination working group is looking for a 2012 Chair! Nominations due Dec 1’ supported by a link for more information on nomination and participation within the working group. The provision of information on how local tourism businesses can become involved in making Hastings County a premier destination for people to visit through Twitter allows for a wider audience to be reached; this is an audience that might otherwise have been unaware of what the County is doing to promote tourism within the region.

Information on Workshops/Meetings/Local Events

What is most relevant to planners is the use of Twitter to promote local workshops, meetings and/or events. For instance, Twitter was being used to promote information amongst the “Wellness community”. On November 23rd, 2011 it was tweeted, ‘Are you a member of the wellness community? Tomorrow is our info session on wellness tourism from 6-8 pm in Wollaston Twp’ followed by the link to the event. Twitter was also used to promote information sessions on the use of social media and website design. Links were also provided. Information on how to contact the County’s economic development department was also tweeted on many occasions over the four months. This frequency of connections made helps to create a direct link of contact for local businesses to the department. The County also used the Twitter page to encourage businesses to contact them with their questions about their business or for help in establishing a new business within the County. Twitter opens up direct lines of communication between the County’s economic development department and local citizens and businesses by offering points of contact and promoting local workshops, information sessions and events in which members of the department will be in attendance.
2. **What hash tags (#) are being used?**

The use of hash tags to directly link to specific communities was used to identify events going on within that area or to announce where the economic development officer was at that moment. As such, three key hash tag themes were used: community, business and tourism promotion. Of the communities mentioned, Tweed was associated with 10 hash tags, Bancroft with 5, North Hastings with 11, Hastings County with 3, Belleville with 2 and so on. As mentioned earlier, when each hash tag is clicked on, more information can be found from various tweeters who are using the same hash tags. The use of hash tags to promote individual communities also allowed specific information to be targeted towards those communities. Events or information sessions posted by the County’s Twitter page will now appear within that community’s Twitter network.

The use of hash tags to promote business-related or specific industry-related items emphasized the importance of each within the County. The word ‘business’ was tagged 20 times while other key words such as ‘econdev’ was tagged 7 times. Key words such as ‘unique’ (3 times), artists (8 times), Shop Local (3 times) and Investment (3 times) were also used in relation to the promotion of business. In support of local industries Craftbeer was tagged 21 times, cheese 7 times and beer 7 times. Specifically highlighting these keywords also helped to emphasize their importance within the County. Again, linking these keywords can link to the larger conversation going on about these terms, concepts and ideas.

Lastly, the use of hash tags to promote tourism targets information towards specific groups of people whether by providing information to a community or providing information about a community. Tourism was tagged a total of 8 times over the four-month period in relation to specific communities. Tagging areas like Toronto (1) can also provide information to that region about tourism within Hastings County. Other keywords used such as Hogfest (1) and Geotourism (2) provides further connection to the discussion of those events and festivals.

3. **Who are the tweets being directed towards?**

There are two main ways in which tweets can be geared towards a specific person or group. For example, an analysis of the tweets can provide a general feel for who the information is being geared towards (i.e. the general public, businesses, tourists etc). The second way in which tweets are geared towards specific groups is by the use of tagging. “Tagging” occurs when the tweeter specifically mentions the person(s) or groups/businesses they directly want to
provide information to. Tagging differs from hash tags. With a hash tag the reader is being
directed towards more information on that specific term or key word, while tagging provides a
link to other businesses, tweeters or organizations. For example, by putting @FABregion within
a tweet, the person associated with that user name will directly receive the information about the
tweet on the Twitter page. This can lead to the information being re-tweeted within that
person(s) Twitter network.

On the whole the tweets are geared towards the general population and local businesses.
Providing information about local festivals and events within the County allows the general
public to learn about what is going on in their community. The promotion of local businesses
also helps the community learn about what’s new to the area, recommended places to eat, and
where to buy local products. The tweets geared towards businesses provide information and
resources on how to run or improve a business. Workshops and information session information
provide opportunities for local businesses to become involved with members of their broader
community. For example, the Wellness information sessions allowed for business that are health
focused to become involved within local fairs and to help promote the awareness of their
ventures to community members.

The other form of targeting a specific person(s) or group is by directly tagging them in a
tweet. Directly linking to a specific group, such as @FABregion was done in order to link those
reading the tweets to FAB region’s Twitter page for further information. Hastings County
interacts with a variety of organizations, businesses and government agencies. They often
retweet information provided from other Twitter accounts to promote achievements, promotions
or events happening around the region.

**Hastings County’s Social Media Strategic Plan**

The Hastings County Social Media Strategic Plan (2009) was developed for the
economic development department in order to incorporate the use of social media into
communicating with local businesses and the broader community. The plan is organized into six
main categories: (1) What is social media? (2) How does social media fit into our Economic
Development and Investment Attractions Strategy? (3) Who is Hastings County? (4)
Communication Framework, (5) Goals and Measurements and (6) Timelines and Benefits. The
strategic plan lays out who, what, when, where, why and how to create a context for the use of
social media within the County’s communication framework. A content analysis was carried out
on the strategic plan applying the above categories in order to get an understanding of how the strategic plan is useful for informing and creating social media policy at the corporate level.

*What is Social Media?*

Although social media is a relevant term within present common lexicon, it is important to provide a definition of what is social media. Social media can mean different things to different people. Therefore, it makes sense to create or propose a standard definition for social media, at least for planning purposes. The strategic plan goes on to further explain how social media operates, offering a context to why it is important and how businesses, entrepreneurs, and the public use such tools to interact and network with on a daily basis. It compares social media to traditional marketing and other ‘traditional’ forms of communication with the public.

*Who is Hastings County?*

For the purpose of the strategic plan that was put together by the economic development office, the primary focus of the plan was to define how social media fits into the activities of the economic development office. This section outlines who is responsible for the updating and maintenance of the social media web pages. The plan states: “it is recommended that we create an employee-piloted brand voice. This voice uses the brand as its face, but is transparent about who is speaking on behalf of the brand, in our case the Economic Development Manager will provide the voice of the brand.” (Hastings County, 2009; 4). The plan also proposes specifically the user names that are to be used on social media websites and emphasizes the need to make the authors of the posts known by either creating personal accounts for websites that allow for multiple authors or by stating up front who is providing the information.

*How Does Social Media Fit into The County’s Economic Development and Investment Attractions Strategies?*

The strategic plan also lays out how the use of social media fits into existing strategies and plans that have been developed by the economic development department. The plan recognizes that in order to attract new businesses to the area and to encourage investment within local communities can be encouraged through the use of social media. Specifically, this section lays out who uses social media based upon demographics. It discusses the populations who are important to target within the County. Furthermore, the plan outlines how the interactivity of social media enables one to “understand [The County’s] targets’ full experience: how they hear about us, how they search for us, who and what influences their decisions, and what happens
after they are engaged” (Hastings County, 2009). Defining how social media is important to the implementation of other strategies and its utility within the functioning of the department lays the foundation for the creation of policy at the corporate level.

Communication Framework

Laying out a detailed communications framework helps to break down the different forms of social media and how they are used since social media exists in many formats from Twitter to Facebook to blog sites. Laying out the function of each and how they are to be used can aid in the creation of policy. The important aspect of this section is creating the framework for how social media will be used. This was done through the creation of a ‘home base’ or a focal point around which all forms of social media would focus upon. The home base in this case is the creation of a blog on the Hastings County economic development web page. This directly feeds people to the County’s main site instead of diverting traffic to other social media websites. Fittingly titled Communities with Opportunities, the blog’s goal is about ‘communicating the experiences of others and promoting their stories. Within these stories we can highlight through photography, video, and audio, the aspects of Hastings County that attracted this person here’ (Hastings County, 2009).

The framework also defines ‘outpost’ and ‘passport’ forms of social media. Outposts are social media sites where there is an active presence, but participation on these sites are split between interacting with people and encouraging them to visit the Hastings County home base blog (Hastings County, 2009). Social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter are such examples of outposts as they essentially operate as micro-blogs, allowing for interaction and the provision of information. Passport forms of social media are websites identified as being influential and important to maintain a presence on, however, are not vital to be updated on a daily basis (Hastings County, 2009). For instance, Youtube, Slideshare, Flickr, Digg and Reddit all offer different platforms for communicating information of various types. Youtube and Flickr are video and photo sharing websites while Slideshare allows you to share presentations online. Digg and Reddit are ‘discovery’ websites that highlight the value of online content as rated by the online community (Hastings County, 2009). Laying out a framework to what each form of social media encompasses and how social media will be used effectively communicated how social media fits into the communication strategy of the County.
Goals and Measurements

The strategic plan lays out five specific goals and three main areas on how the goals will be measured. Laying out goals and how they are to be measured effectively communicated the role that social media has within the corporate structure. The plan starts out with an overarching goal ‘to build awareness and to make Hastings County’s Economic Development Office more approachable’ (Hastings County, 2009). Underneath this they also layout the following goals: generate more traffic to our website, increase the number of investment inquiries received, improve the promotion of our events, provide the ‘gold standard’ of customer service delivery and to develop more avenues for communication. Providing specific goals for the use of social media created a direction setting framework as to what the Economic Development Department wanted to achieve through its use.

The plan also laid out specific measurement criteria. Influence metrics, engagement metrics and results metrics are identified as the three main measurements that will be used to measure the success of using social media to achieving the goals of building awareness and becoming more approachable. Measurements include simple analytical measures such as the number of page views to their main website to total number of inquiries received, to more qualitative measurements such as topics being discussed within their networks or the type of people/organizations that are being engaged with (Hastings County, 2009). Certain measurements are more easily tracked than others; however, understanding both the quantitative and qualitative measures will ensure the quality of information being provided to social networks. Goals and measurements are important for the creation of a policy framework for the sue of social media. Hastings County’s goals and measurements clearly defined what their main goals were for its use and how they were going to measure it. This frame of reference acts as a guide to enforce the purpose of why social media is being used within the organization.

Timelines and Benefits

Lastly, timelines and benefits details the priority actions of what needs to happen and when for the establishment of social media within the organization. Specifically, the plan lays out when the evaluation of the strategy should take place (four to six months after initiation) and how often goals and strategies should be updated. The timeline function is important when establishing social media as a form of communication with the public. A well-thought-out timeline will articulate the steps that are needed to establish a County presence within the various
social media networks. For instance, the plan states that the first step is to set up their dedicated ‘home base’ page on their main website (Hastings County, 2009). It further goes on to break it down by creating personal accounts for each blogger and the approach that will be taken in regard to the maintenance of the blog. The plan also details the creation of accounts on other social media websites, creating listening (i.e. analytical) platforms, maintenance of social media sites and lastly monitoring and evaluation of their efforts. Defining when specific actions will happen, whether on a linear scale and/or temporal scale will articulate the steps needed to successfully use social media as a form of communicating with the public.

Conclusion

Hastings County’s social media strategic plan effectively laid out what social media is, how it is to be incorporated into the ‘traditional’ communications framework and when and where social media will be used. The detailed framework for the use of social medias within the everyday function of the Economic Development Department outlines the importance of communicating with the public and local businesses in a non-traditional manner. Having a clear and well-thought-out strategic plan will act as a guide to the creation of policies for social media’s use within an organizations communication strategy and begin to develop standards of etiquette for its use. Hastings County was successful at implementing, creating, and establishing a social media strategic plan and following through. The County’s use of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook has been effective at providing information and engaging with the local business community and the public at large.
Chapter 5. Analysis

Social media is a potential tool that planners have at their grasp to engage their local community. As identified in the literature review, social media can be cost-effective, can redefine the sense of place, and engage a variety of demographics and work towards creating social capital. As the findings from the Twitter analysis have shown, social media can be effective at promoting local events and festivals, provide information and notices, advertise workshops, seminars and local meetings as well as promote the work occurring within the County, municipality or planning firm. But what are the implications for planners when it comes to using social media to engage the local community. The following analysis takes into consideration the information gathered from the literature review and Twitter analysis, as well as an interview with Hastings County’s Economic Development Officer Andrew Redden (Personal Communication, Interview, April 19, 2012). Consent was given to identify Redden within this report.

The following benefits have been associated with use of social media: engaging a variety of demographics, increased visibility, effective two-way communication, the redefining of a sense of ‘place’ and shifting from a reactionary to a proactive position. Each of these associations have the ability to enhance the public engagement process within the planning process.

**Social Media engages a variety of demographics**

The literature review identified the potential for social media to interact with a wider range of populations than more traditional forms of community engagement. Social media was also identified as creating more opportunities for citizens to participate as it removed the time constraints that holding a public meeting or involvement in a committee would require. The larger breadth of people who can become involved when using social media to interact with the local planning body and municipal government.

The use of different social media platforms attracts different demographics. In the case of Hastings County, there is a difference between who they interact with on Facebook versus who they interact with on Twitter. Facebook primarily caters to the local population. Redden identified that their followers on Facebook are mainly residents from Hastings County who are
looking for information on events happening in the community or job postings within the community on their dedicated Facebook jobs page.

Twitter on the other hand has a larger audience that is not specific to the local community. ‘Everyone and their uncle’ use Twitter, therefore, demographically the followers of @HastingsCounty are less homogenous compared to those who follow them on Facebook. This fits into the idea of using Twitter to reach out to the ‘lone eagles’ as described by Redden. One of the purposes is to reach out to people who are in Toronto and Ottawa who have transferable skills. Lone eagles are people who can live out in rural areas with a broadband connection and cellular service to perform their jobs. This is especially conducive to the creative economy that Hastings County is establishing in regard to economic development. Therefore, Twitter has a diverse range of followers that do not necessarily reside within the community, but can be used to attract new residents to the area.

In terms of implications for planners, engaging the local community appears to be most effective when using Facebook as compared to Twitter. Hastings County’s experience with Facebook suggests that this may be a better platform to have a two-way dialogue with the local community. The research done by Evans-Cowley and Hollander (2010) attests to the ability of Facebook to engage the local community. With most planning-related groups on Facebook being initiated by the community (86%), planners can use Facebook and to some extent Twitter to get ahead of planning conflicts and to more effectively engage a diverse range of community members.

**Social Media is effective at creating two-way communication**

As identified in the literature review, traditional forms of public participation are seen to be one-way flows of information with little room for dialogue between the planner and the community member. This one-way flow of information makes the public consultation process frustrating and irrelevant, with community members ultimately feeling discouraged. Although providing information is important to providing important technical information, the exchange of information needs to occur both ways.

Social media has been shown, as in the case of Hastings County’s experience, to create a platform for two-way communication. Facebook has been more effective compared to Twitter when it comes to creating a two-way dialogue with the public. Hastings County’s Facebook page is left as an open forum so that anyone in the public can post a question, event or comment.
This allows for community members to directly respond to something that’s been posted on the County’s wall and further ask questions, or provide information of their own. Redden also experienced direct communication through personal messaging on both Twitter and Facebook to information that was posted on behalf of the County often with people seeking further information.

Social media further created a two-way form of communication by directly seeking input from the public. As demonstrated in the Twitter analysis, questions were tweeted in order to gain further information about who was attending an event or about a specific topic. Social media opens up a new avenue for engaging the local population in a two-way discussion. Planners can harness this tool to gain public input on planning issues that have a greater impact on the community. This can be especially effective when undertaking a downtown revitalization project, developing community parks or for larger development projects that are perceived to have a greater impact on the community than the every day severance or minor variance application. Planners can use social media platforms to gain further information from the public earlier within the process and over a longer period of time.

**Social Media removes the confines of ‘the office’**

Traditional public engagement methods are restricted to the confines of ‘place’. Public meetings are held at specific dates and times that require the public to take time out of their schedules to travel to and attend. Furthermore, traditional methods of public engagement confine the interaction of the planner with the public to meetings and inquiries through the planning office. Such methods of interaction requires the public to come to the planner to address their concerns instead of the planner actively seeking information from the community. This continues to define the planners role as reactionary instead of truly ‘planning’ for the community (Turner-Lee 2010; Mandarano, 2010).

As the literature has shown, social media removes the idea of a sense of ‘place’ and creates a new realm in which people interact and engage with each other. People are no longer confined to the time constraints of a public meeting and are able to participate within the planning process on their own time, be it early in the morning, mid-afternoon or late at night.

Social media can also remove the confines of the idea of ‘the office’. Mobile technology allows for real time updates. This was particularly seen through Hastings County’s tweets, especially during community workshops, information sessions and events. The ability to attach
video and photographs to a status update or tweet can bring community members into that particular moment. Furthermore, Redden described the use of social media as being a 24/7 trade show. Although one may not be using social media at that particular moment, it is available at all hours to the general public, which enables one to be visible at all hours. This reduces costs and increases effectiveness of providing information to the general public. Although open houses are still an important method of public engagement, creating an online ‘open house’ through the provision of information on social media platforms allows for interactions between the planner and the public to occur outside the hours of a traditional open house.

**Social Media Increases Visibility**

Social media has the ability to increase the visibility of both the planning process and the municipality/corporation for which the planner works. Creating a visible presence is key in order to engage with the local public. Without visibility, social media can become unconventional and useless in terms of engaging with the local community. Creating awareness and visibility of planning-related issue, whether it is for the purposes of seeking input on a development project or receiving commentary on a community-wide development plan or downtown revitalization plan, is vital in order to optimize the full potential of social media in the consultation process.

Hastings County has used Twitter to increase its visibility along with the townships and municipalities within its jurisdiction. Redden agreed that social media has helped to heighten the awareness of Hastings County, in general. Requests to speak at conferences, being directly contacted for interviews by other municipalities and so on have set Hastings County apart as being an innovator in the use of social media to relay information and interact with the local community. The economic development department under the direction of Redden uses social media, and it has been effective at creating a presence for Hastings County. Tweeting about events, achievements and local businesses help to attract the attention of both members in the local community and those living afar.

Planners can use social media in the same fashion that Hastings County has used social media for economic development purposes. Creating visibility of downtown revitalization plans or community wide improvement plans can create greater awareness of what the planning department is undertaking within the community. Seeking input on what the community would like to see in their downtown or within a new park development is essential to ensuring that the
future design for these areas are enjoyed by all. Creating visibility about a project and associated meetings or community charettes can be accomplished through social media. This can further be beneficial for economic development and tourism purposes.

**Social Media shifts your role from reactionary to proactive**

The literature has emphasized that the community’s role within the planning process is to react to the decisions made by local planners. In many ways planners also play a reactionary role within their daily practice. This is particularly true when it comes to the business of land severances, plans of subdivision and minor variances, just to name a few. Social media is best utilized when planners are truly ‘planning’ for their communities; that is, when they are working to improve the communities in which they plan for through various revitalization or community improvement projects. Furthermore, social media can be used to seek public input when creating social programming for communities, planning transit-related development or developing cultural plans, just to name a few examples. This helps to shift the role of the planner from reacting to being proactive within the community.

Opposition to planning-related decisions often comes about due to the involvement of the community in the latter stages of the public consultation process. As the literature suggests, the community is often consulted when decisions have already been made and public consultation takes the form of placation in order to fulfill legislative requirements (Arnstein, 1969). Although certain projects will continue to illicit strong opposition from the community, there is a lot to be said about involving the community earlier on in the process. Redden suggests that social media has the ability to get information in front of people, that is, getting out information as soon as possible or at the very beginning of the process. Whether social media is being used to provide information to the community on a particular project that is occurring within a community or to seek input on a plan, getting in front of an issue before it can wield strong community opposition is important. Social media has the potential to mitigate future conflict between planners and the community.

Determining how to use social media to seek public input is up to the planner and their corporation to decide. Redden uses social media platforms to pose questions to the followers of the various social media platforms in order to gain information from the community. Posting an online survey, providing links to websites that allow for public commentary on a project or
simply creating a two-way dialogue on a social media platform all have the ability to effectively engage the public throughout the planning process.

Limitations to the use of Social Media by Planners

Social media has the capability of reaching a wider breadth of the public, especially due to the proliferation of mobile technologies. However, social media is limited to the members of the public who utilize sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The use of social media for public consultation is also limited, as discussed in the literature, to those who can afford mobile and computer technology (Turner-Lee 2010; Mandarano 2010; Evans-Cowley Hollander 2010). This limits the demographic base that a planner interacts with on social media platforms.

Social media also limits the type of interaction that occurs between the planner and the public. There is the potential for information to be miscommunicated when there is not the opportunity for clarification. Responding to the inquiries that come through social media platforms may lead to information getting lost in translation and misinterpreted. Since social media is a less conventional method of providing information to the public on behalf of a corporation or municipality, this can become a liability. For example, face-to-face interaction can reduce the miscommunication and misinterpretation that can occur when receiving information online. Face-to-face interaction allows for follow-up questions and further clarification on the spot, rather than waiting for a planner to respond to an inquiry over a social media platform. Although social media can increase the access to planning information and planners themselves, there is still an important role for traditional methods of public participation.

Lastly, social media is limited in how it can be used. Determining timing, what type of information to share and how to share it can limit become overwhelming for both a planner using social media and the public receiving the information. Social media may be limited to only certain processes such as receiving input on community plans. Current legislation dictates how comments can be received, especially for land severances or plans of subdivision. Therefore, receiving comments outside of the legislated process makes the use of social media obsolete.

Overcoming the Limitations to Social Media

Overcoming the limitations to social media is pertinent in order for planners to effectively utilize it as a tool for engaging with the community. Social media is just one avenue for providing information to the public. Not every person within a community will use social
media to interact with others or to seek out information on planning matters. Providing a variety of formats in which to disseminate information in regard to planning initiatives is still imperative. Legal requirements under the Planning Act set out the rules and regulations for consulting with the public and providing timely and adequate notice. Although social media is outside of the realm of the Planning Act in terms of providing notice to the community, it can act supplementary to the legislated requirements. This, in essence, overcomes the limitations to those who use social media, as seemingly traditional forms of consulting with the public are being upheld.

Miscommunication is a factor in all aspects of interacting with the public. Planning-related issues are hardly ever clear-cut as they are often bogged down by factors such as political will-power, terminology and lack of information. Social media can either fuel or improve the miscommunication of information. Recognizing this limitation is important in order to move forward. Social media can be used to link the community to important planning documents that are related to a planning issue. Instead of attempting to answer each inquiry through social media individually, having pre-arranged frequently asked questions or media release packages can help reduce the level of miscommunication through such sites. It is further encouraged that planners use social media in order to provide further contact information. This can allow for concerned members of the public to engage with planners face-to-face or over the telephone. This further creates planners who are accessible to members of their community and improves the communication of information.

Social media can be used not only to engage the community in planning matters, but also to provide them with information for educational purposes or to provide links to important applications/documents within a municipality or corporation. Using social media to provide explanation on different planning terms or concepts, or to provide information on planning initiatives that are currently going on within a department will help to better inform the community on what is occurring within their neighbourhoods. Furthermore this may help to answer questions that the public may have without having to directly contact a planner. Using social media to provide links to important forms integral within the planning process also makes planning departments (both in the public and private spheres) accessible. The above uses of social media make it a versatile tool. Although not directly engaging the public for their ideas or concerns, social media can be used to provide access to important information on different
aspects of the planning process or planning initiatives within a community on top of providing access to important application and planning forms integral to carrying out such activities as land severances, zoning and minor variances (to name a few).

**Conclusion**

Social media has the potential to influence and enhance the role of the planner when it comes to engaging the local community. Social media should not take over the role of traditional forms of public consultation. However, it has the potential to compliment and further enhance the consultation process. As the literature has shown, traditional forms of consultation fall short of truly engaging the public (Arnstein, 1969; Davidoff 1965; Checokway 1985; Rebori, 2011; Humphreys 2010). Although social media is in its infancy and its use for public consultation is still being explored, its ability to fill in the gaps within traditional methods makes it an important tool to investigate. Planners can use social media to increase awareness of planning-related decisions that have an impact on a community. Determining how to use social media on a daily basis and how to incorporate it into an existing corporate or municipal structure will be addressed in the next section.
Chapter 6. Discussion and Recommendations

The use of social media within a professional setting can be intimidating and off-putting. As a professional, planners are often confined to the rules and policies set out by their employer, whether it be a private planning firm or governmental body. Social media in itself can be seen as taking a risk when it comes to consulting the public, as these platforms are essentially public forums where anyone can post information. Creating a clearly laid out strategic plan for the use of social media can provide guidance to both the corporation and the planner. This was particularly useful in Hastings County.

The following recommendations for etiquette/use and policy creation are meant to help guide the planner in establishing a social media presence. The recommendations are meant to guide and benefit the planner, the corporation/municipality that the planner works for and the public that the planner is in consultation with.

Recommendations for Etiquette

Knowing how to use social media within a professional context is important before a planner begins to use these platforms to engage the community. Having a well thought out etiquette policy can enhance the use of social media.

1. Create individual accounts

Although certain platforms do not allow for multiple account holders, for those that do it is important to create individual accounts. Blog sites are the most common form of social media platforms that allow for multiple authors to publish to one account. This helps direct the readers of that blog to the specific publisher of a post. For sites that only allow one account, such as Twitter or Facebook, planners should be encouraged to create professional profiles that allow them to contribute to the social media site.

2. Take a team approach

Getting a few members within a planning department to manage and update social media platforms is important. Whether providing information on a planning process or posting information about a planning concept, having a variety of planners involved will reduce the amount of work it can take to manage the social media websites. The more people involved can increase the potential for community engagement.
3. Create a schedule

Directly related to taking a team approach, creating a schedule can help ensure that information is not duplicated (unless this is desired). Assigning one person a week to writing a blog about a planning project occurring within the community or a planning related principle can reduce the amount of time and effort that one person would have to put in to maintain the sites. For example, if four people within a department are responsible for updating a blog site, this would only require them to do so twelve times a year (i.e. assuming they are responsible for one post a month).

4. Appropriateness

One of the questions planners need to ask themselves is what exactly does one post on social media websites?: information about a planning project within the community? Information about an upcoming event or community meeting? Questions to the public to gain feedback on a community planning issue currently taking place? Determining what information is to be shared through social media platforms can be a daunting task. For starters, it is recommended that planners keep the information relevant and appropriate. Information that is directly relevant to the community will help to create awareness and education. Keeping information appropriate means providing content that is only related to the business of the planning department. Information should not be opinionated nor should it be political. The purpose of using social media to engage the community is to provide opportunities for commentary without being pre-disposed to a professional opinion. Although many planning issues within a community are political issues, keeping politics out of social media posts will enhance the interaction of the planner with the community.

5. Timing

Updating and maintaining social media websites can be time consuming; however modern mobile technologies remove the confines of the office and the traditional public meeting. That being said, planners using social media should be mindful when they are using such platforms to interact with the community. Setting restrictions on when information can be shared, such as only during business hours, will reduce the stress that one may feel when maintaining these sites. Although community discussions that take place online happen at all
hours of the day and night, those comments and ideas will still be there the next day working day.

6. When to Respond

One of the biggest taboos is for planners to respond to comments that are made through the various social media platforms. This is especially true for sites such as Facebook that can act as a community online forum. Although Hastings County has had very little negative commentary on their websites, this is a major issue that needs to be addressed since many planning decisions can polarize members of the community against the process. In the beginning (as will be discussed in more detail during the policy creation section), it is advisable for planners to use the various platforms for relaying information. However, as time progresses and planners become more comfortable using such technologies, opening up these sites to more meaningful conversation can possibly lead to negative comments and feedback, and so planners should be aware of such outcomes and develop a strategy of how to deal with such situations when they arise.

There will always be that one person who is not happy with a planning decision or process. Since most planning decisions are of a political nature, negative feedback can hardly be avoided. However, social media can be used to provide further information that the public may be lacking or to further explain a process that is misunderstood. It is up to the planner to judge and weigh whether or not to respond to a post as the moderator and supplier of information. Moderating what is being shared on social media platforms is necessary in order to ensure that the conversation is relevant to the planning process. As the moderator of such social media websites, comments that are derogatory towards a member of the municipality/corporation or a member of the community can be removed. Although removing comments may be seen as unethical as it could be viewed as regulating the tone of communication and exchange, it is advisable to do so in the aforementioned scenario.

7. Addressing Negative Attacks on Individual Planners

Negative comments and personal attacks are sadly a common occurrence on social media websites. Social media sites have built into them mechanisms to both regulate and flag inappropriate comments made by other users, however they are meant to be reactionary rather than precautionary. Negative comments are often born out of discontent of a process that did not go a particular person’s way, and more often than not, they blame the planner or planning
department for providing them with the negative response. This if further compounded by the fact, that planners are bound to provincial policies, municipal regulations and by-laws that are meant to protect the greater good. Depending on the nature of the comments received through social media platforms, planners need to decide how best to approach the situation.

Defamatory comments that personally attack a planner (whether it is based on personal or physical qualities) should not be trifled with. Social media platforms have built-in reporting mechanisms that allow users to report those making such comments. Although it may be the first reaction to interact with the angry community member in order to address any such issues, when it comes to personal matters, its not worth the effort. Responding may only escalate the issue further, and at the end of the day, not resolve anything. Although social media platforms are meant to be a forum for community discussion, deleting such comments is a must in order to create an on-line environment that is free from defamatory/derogatory comments.

Comments that express a discontent with the planning process or a planning decision may be easier to address than the former situation. Providing further information to the community about a planning decision can help dissipate any misinformation that may be the source of contention (if that is the case). If the matter is resolvable through face-to-face interaction, social media can be used to provide the office contact information of the planner. This may help to diffuse the situation. Not only is the planner showing an effort to discuss the issue, but she or he is also increasing the public’s perception of planners as being accessible and relatable.

Social media sites such as Facebook can also restrict the posting of information by followers or users. It may be necessary at times to remove the more interactive aspect of social media sites and strictly use them as a platform for providing information. Determining how and when to respond, as mentioned above, is a matter of policy creation. It may be a firm or municipality’s protocol to not engage with members of the public in regard to negative commentary. Or they may encourage planners to engage in comments that do not directly attack an individual planner, but are critical of the planning process or a planning decision as a whole. There is no clear answer on how to handle such issues, as they are more often than not a matter of sensitivity and liability.

8. Take Risks

Taking calculated risks is necessary when using social media. Since these platforms are largely open forums, there will always be risks associated with the information that members of
the community post. Being creative with posts is also important. Putting up information that is out of the ordinary will help attract followers of your sites. Truly engaging the public by asking for their input into various planning decisions, such as asking for input into what members of the community would like to see in the revitalization process of their downtown, can potentially bring about a higher level of community involvement within the project. Social media websites such as Facebook allow for users to post polls asking a variety of questions. Furthermore, event postings that allow members to respond will help the planner gauge the number of people coming out. This has been successful for Hastings County as online invitations through Facebook typically elicit the same number of people who show up to an event as those who responded affirmatively on Facebook.

9. Take Responsibility

Planners can take responsibility for the use of social media in two ways. First and foremost it's important for planners, especially those who hold more senior positions, to take charge. It is often easy enough to push the responsibilities of maintaining and engaging with the community onto an intern. Although an intern may be qualified to manage inquiries coming into the planning department, there may be some topics that are better fielded by more senior planners with the corporation or firm.

It is also important to take responsibility by identifying who is responsible for posting the information. This ties back into the creation of individual accounts. When this is not possible to do so, planners should directly cite who is posting the information. This makes it easier to direct community feedback and questions to the planner that posted the information. This also helps the planners who are also engaged with social media to see what information has been previously posted and by whom. Greater accountability is created once specific planners begin to identify themselves as the author of a post.

**Recommendations for Policy Creation**

Planning firms and municipal governments typically have to comply to internal policies related to external communication procedures. Social media can often conflict with communication policies due to the real time nature of many of these platforms. The following policy recommendations were adapted from Hastings County’s Social Media Strategic Plan. It is important to note that the strategic plan is specifically internal to the Economic Development
department, however the County is currently working on creating a policy for social media’s use across all departments.

1. **Outline what platforms are going to be used and how they will be used.**

   Hastings County outlined each of the platforms that they were going to use and how each platform functioned. The County also created a structure for how the different platforms would interact. For example, the County created a home blog page that would act as the ‘home-base’ for all things related to social media. Other platforms such as *Twitter* or *Facebook* would still be used to interact with the community, but followers on the other platforms would be redirected to the home base blog for further information. This also allows for the respective social media websites to provide different forms of information, especially when the follower base can vary from those on *Facebook* to those on *Twitter*. Clearly defining what each of the social media platforms are and how they will be used separately and in conjunction with each other will help to create a framework to follow when creating policies related to social media’s use to promote public participation.

2. **Create a vision**

   Creating a vision for the use of social media is important. Before embarking into the online world, it is advisable to sit down with the communications department, members of the planning department and any other department that has a stake in the use of social media to engage with the community. Creating a vision will help to guide the overall use of social media for the corporation or municipality. A vision statement, or statement of purpose, will help to steer the planners and be a constant reminder of why social media is being used to engage with the community.

3. **Set out Goals and Objectives**

   Jumping into social media without defining goals and objectives for its use can make its use unclear and unsupported. Hastings County clearly laid out the goals and objectives related to the use of social media. Whether its to create greater visibility of community events and information sessions or to gain public input on a downtown revitalization plan, clearly defining these within a policy framework will direct the use of social media within existing communication policies.
4. Set out measurements

Measuring the outcomes of the goals and objectives are important to determine if social media is reaching its intended goal of increasing public participation in the planning process. For the most part there are a variety of analytical software and programs available that allow a social media user to analyze the demographics of their followers on a platform, such as *Google Analytics*. This information can be broken down into age, sex, location, profession and any further information that other social media users have provided when they signed up.

Using surveys to measure the outcomes of a variety of goals and objectives can also help to determine if social media is creating more dialogue with the local community. This may be particularly useful when holding a public meeting to gage how people are finding out about meetings and open houses. Posting surveys on social media platforms can also help to measure the visibility and accessibility of the planning department through the use of such methods.

5. Establish rules and boundaries

Establishing rules and boundaries for the use of social media can reduce the conflict that can occur when dealing with existing communication policies and guidelines. Setting “time-of-use policies” on when social media will be used can abate conflict. Setting out strict policies for what type of information is to be shared through such platforms is also important (see next section about creating information schedules). Clearly defining the type of information that is to be shared can lead to the creation of pre-approved material that can be posted at the leisure of the planner without having to be cleared by communications. It may also be advisable when first establishing social media to restrict its use to certain members. This may require a joint effort on behalf of the communications department and the planning department to work out these logistics. As the corporation or municipality gets more comfortable with the use of social media, granting access to more planners within the department can occur.

6. Establish an information schedule/pre-approved messages

Similarly to the creation of a schedule for who should post information and when, in terms of etiquette, creating a list of pre-approved messages can enhance the use of social media. Although this may not be practical for information that is being provided in real time, information such as upcoming events and meetings can be pre-approved ahead of time. This type of information is often provided well ahead of when the actual event is happening, so getting this type of information approved ahead of time is typically easy. Although it is
important to provide engaging and new information related to the planning process, repeating certain tweets (as was seen with Hastings County) can be beneficial, especially when promoting specific events or meetings.

Setting out policy that relates to the real-time nature of some information posts is crucial. Predefining acceptable topics, the language that is to be used and when the information is shared can reduce the amount of interaction needed between the planning and communication department. Furthermore, creating policies on the type of information, especially images and external information that is not directly linked to the corporation or municipality can enhance the use of social media for both planners and communication coordinators.

7. Training

Training can be beneficial to implementing a social media strategic plan. Without the proper training and information, social media can easily fall to the wayside. It is also important that once social media is implemented that it is kept up to date and current. Although this may seem like a huge task to undertake, especially in terms of time, with proper training, this can be reduced. Training can also be beneficial for reviewing a corporation or municipality’s communication policies as well. Lastly, it may also be important to outline policies for potential interaction with the community via social media platforms. Providing further information on a particular post may be one thing, but training planners on when it is appropriate and not appropriate to respond to a post will help to reduce any potential negative outcomes when using social media.

8. Timeline

Creating a timeline for when specific social media platforms will be launched and created will help to guide the organization or municipality that wants to establish a social media presence. In the beginning it may be advisable to start out with a beta test. Starting out by using social media to only supply information can help planners and other users on behalf of the corporation or municipality to get comfortable with the various platforms and technological devices used to maintain these sites. Although not acting as a true form of engagement, providing information at the earlier stages is important for developing a following on the various social media websites. Setting out when the various social media websites will go ‘live’, so to speak, allows for subsequent policies to be created for individual social media sites that are yet to be implemented.
Conclusion

The following recommendations are to act as a guide for planners, corporations and municipalities that are considering the use of social media as a form of public engagement. Whether using social media to provide information to the public or to gain input and commentary from the local community, it is important to consider the implications of the information or interactions that can take place. Social media has the potential to engage members of the community that might not otherwise come out to formal meeting or events. Its use as an informal mechanism to engage with local citizens should not be taken lightly. However, social media can be a fun experience that greatly increases the visibility of planners, the planning process, and planning decisions that impact the local community. Having a well-thought-out strategic plan that helps dictate the etiquette and policy formation for its adoption into existing communication frameworks will only work to enhance the role of the planner.
Chapter 7. Conclusion

This report has attempted to show that there is a role for social media within the professional realm. Planners can use social media to enhance and engage the local community within the planning process. Although there is still a valid argument for continuing on with traditional face-to-face methods of community consultation, social media has the potential to reach out to those who often find themselves to be busy to attend a meeting. Engaging with the younger generations that have shown in the past low voter turn out rates and low civic participation can be facilitated through the use of social media.

As the literature review has show, there are still many benefits to continuing on with traditional methods of participation. People still value the face-to-face interactions that occur and the ability to directly speak to a professional planner. However, public participation methods that are traditionally used can be seen as frustrating, especially when the public feels that they are being placated through the process. Social media has its perks of being able to reduce the amount of time involved on the part of the community and the planners to exchange information and provide commentary. However, there still exists drawbacks to its use that such as issues of access and imbedding social media into existing institutions.

As Chapter Three has shown, Twitter has been effectively mobilized by Hastings County to interact with the online community. The information that is provided covers a variety of topics from local events and festivals, tourism, business advice and information on meetings and information sessions to name a few. The establishment of a Social Media Strategic Plan (2009) has charted the course that the economic development department is taking; it acts as a guide to the use of the various social media platforms.

The analysis of Hastings County’s use of social media and the results of the interview have shown that social media has created a positive influence on the way that The County’s economic development department engages with the local community and online followers. The use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter have allowed The County to share information about upcoming events, invite followers to attend these events, promote local businesses and festivals within the area and much more. Social media’s use for engaging with the community has created new avenues, essentially increasing the visibility of The County and its economic development department.
Lastly, the recommendations for etiquette and policy creation are meant to act as a guide for planners who are actively looking to incorporate social media into their professional working lives. One of the biggest challenges that can arise in using social media is related to the policies and frameworks that exist within corporations and municipalities. Addressing these concerns ahead of time through a well-thought-out strategic plan, similar to the one that Hastings County has put together, can alleviate the tension and anxiety that goes along with using unconventional methods to share information and interact with the public.

Social media is a beneficial tool that planners can use to engage the online community. Although the discussion has focused around the accomplishments and success of Hastings County’s economic development department and their use of social media, there are many implications that can be drawn out of their experience for planners. Although social media may not be ideal for providing information on a current land severance a planner is working on, defining when and how to use social media will help to provide direction for its use. Social media, therefore, may best be suited for planning projects that are related to community development undertakings such as downtown revitalization plans, larger development projects that are likely to have a larger impact on the local community and for the promotion of meetings and open houses that are legislatively required to be carried out. Social media can be used to effectively engage with the local community. It is up to the planner to decide just how they want to incorporate it into their everyday professional lives.
Chapter 8: Bibliography


## Chapter 9: Appendices

### Appendix A Chart 1: Hash Tag (#) Word Count

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