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# The Intermediating Role of Municipal Urban Planners in Online Discussions with Citizens

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**ABSTRACT**

We examine how urban planners in Helsinki work as intermediaries to "balance power" between actively participating citizens and more marginalised groups – citizens who do not traditionally participate – in online discussions about urban planning. We study the tensions planners experience while interacting with citizens in online environments, especially on social media. Using a questionnaire and interviews, we report on tensions between planners' perceptions of *active vs. passive roles in social media, equal vs. equitable opportunities to participate*, and sides in the *debate over allocation of resources*. The study shows that engaging marginalised groups requires offline interventionist strategies.

## Introduction

In the early 2000s, the digital revolution and social media were expected to democratise planning and readily include new voices and participants once rarely heard. In this article, we study how urban planners in Helsinki view their intermediating role in online discussions with citizens around urban planning. We are interested in finding out whether all citizens have equal opportunities to participate in and affect planning processes in the digital age, with channels of participation increasingly online, and what urban planners can do to obtain roughly representative online discussion input from citizens on planning issues.

We study the kinds of practices and tensions urban planners in Helsinki experience in their intermediating role in online discussion and participation forums. The online world that hosts lively and spontaneous discussions related to urban planning includes self-organised Facebook groups and other social media channels such as Twitter and blogs. We analyse them in relation to official channels. The most active self-organised Facebook group that discusses urban planning in Helsinki is "More City to Helsinki" (*Lisää kaupunkia Helsinkiin*) with over 18,000 members. It has sparked a great deal of discussion among planners and researchers in Finland (Mäenpää & Faehnle, 2017; Niitamo & Sjöblom, 2018). Planners follow the More City group frequently and other groups sporadically. However, urban planners are concerned about the limited representation of different citizen groups in active online discussion groups and forums (Niitamo & Sjöblom, 2018).

The equality of political participation is under discussion in Finland. Studies have shown that the most active participants in urban planning are normally highly educated, well-paid citizens of

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middle age or older. The views of young people, citizens with an immigrant background and citizens with lower income or education levels are often left out of different forums of civic engagement (Grönlund & Wass, 2016). The representativeness of information resulting from participatory actions is also – perhaps even more – problematic in online and digital participation, in which only competent and tech-savvy citizens tend to participate (Grönlund & Wass, 2016; Luhtakallio & Mustranta, 2017).

By equality, we mean the need to treat all participants the same regardless of their position outside the deliberative forum; here, we mean offering the same participation channels to everyone. By equity, we mean the need to account for the advantages and disadvantages that have shaped participants' experiences and capabilities to participate, which requires treating participants differently in order to create conditions of fair deliberation (Abdullah et al., 2016; Gutmann & Thompson, 2009).

Many researchers argue that new communication technology has not fundamentally changed urban planning and claim that planning is still done in a top-down, rational-functionalistic manner (Kahila-Tani, 2016; Lapintie, 2017; Lapintie & Di Marino, 2015). The use of information gained from online forums, social media, blogs and other online channels still depends on the individual planner who may or may not take advantage of these new interaction channels and novel information (Allmendinger, 2017; Kahila-Tani, 2016). The potential of social media is often reduced to a one-way medium where the public can be informed in an understandable manner (Fredericks & Foth, 2013; Hyyryläinen & Tuisku, 2016; Lapintie, 2017).

Previous research found urban planners in Helsinki were specifically missing the views of families with young children, young people and immigrants in urban planning processes (Niitamo & Sjöblom, 2018). Our article is motivated by urban planners' interest in hearing from a more diverse group of citizens in online environments.

We examine planners' role as intermediaries (Forester, 1989, 1999, 2009) in the digital environment of online discussions. We focus on the planner's role in enhancing the voice of marginalised or quiet groups of citizens who have traditionally been left on the fringes of participatory processes of urban planning.

Our research question is: What kinds of tensions do municipal urban planners experience in relation to their expected intermediating role in online discussions with citizens?

## Urban Planners' Intermediating Role in Communicative Planning Theory

The goal of increasing participation by stakeholders, especially citizens, is part of the communicative turn in urban planning theory, which developed in the late 1980s in reaction to instrumental-rationalist urban planning (Allmendinger, 2017; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). Briefly, communicative planning is a democratic attempt to enhance justice and environmental and social sustainability in interaction with a larger group of participants (Healey, 1992). The urban planner's role is highlighted in communicative planning theory. John Forester writes about deliberative practitioners who should adopt a reflective position in planning and reflect on their own role and the use of power in planning processes (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Forester, 1999). Critical listening, reflection in action and constructive argument combine in the deliberative practice (Forester, 1999, p. 12).

According to Patsy Healey, the planner needs to recognise and hold on to the preconditions of planning while encouraging different kinds of voices and participants to join in the planning process (1992, p. 237). This is what Forester refers to as the in-between roles of intermediaries (1999), which can transform an adversarial process into a partly collaborative one. Intermediating roles in planning

refers to the collaborative work planners are expected to do with various parties in planning processes: "to work in the midst of many interested parties and often in the face of conflict" (1999, p. 61).

Forester's remarks promote effective processes of public learning and practical, innovative instances of public deliberation (Forester, 1999, p. 61). Although finding consensus among actors is not the goal, the planner should strive to act as a "power balancer" and defender of marginal groups before decision-making (Forester, 1999; Innes & Booher, 1999; Tayebi, 2013). Because of their expertise, planners have the power to regulate information about and shape attention to planning issues (Forester, 1989). Interaction is required from the planning profession because the several stakeholders in urban planning are interdependent (Forester, 1999, p. 90).

However, mediation includes ethical and political dimensions in which claims of being neutral or impartial are quickly challenged (Forester, 1999, p. 190). Instead of neutral bureaucrats, Forester argues, intermediaries should be like *civic friends* who seek out those affected by public issues and those who will attend to their inclusion. He insists that planners must be able to distinguish deeper concerns of citizens from superficial rhetoric, a phenomenon which in our view is omnipresent and often polarised in online discussions. More recently Forester (2009, 2013) has studied mediation in the contexts of public disputes and conflicts.

## Planners' Role in Mediation and Its Critique

*Information* is an important source of power for the planner, Forester points out, defining five approaches to how planners can use it: technician, incrementalist, liberal-advocate, structuralist and progressive (1989, pp. 29–31). In the *technician approach*, power lies in expert information and supplies solutions to technical problems; here, planners think that political judgements can be avoided. In the *incrementalist approach*, information responds to organisational needs to have a project approved with minimal delay and to know what sorts of design problems to avoid. Under the *liberal-advocate approach*, information can be used by under-represented or relatively unorganised groups to enable them to participate more effectively in the planning process. This approach attempts to redress the inequalities of participation and distribution by bringing excluded groups into planning processes (Forester, 1989, pp. 29–30). In the *structuralist approach*, the planner's information is a source of power because it legitimises the existing structures of power and ownership but allows people no freedom to participate in planning processes. Finally, information in the *progressive approach* is a source of power because it can enable the participation of citizens and avoid the legitimising functions of the structuralist approach (Forester, 1989, pp. 30–31). Forester emphasises the planner's role by noting that the extent to which information is shared may depend on the ability of the intermediary. Forester (1999, p. 189) raises practical concerns such as differences in language and distance and lack of familiarity that may lead to the exclusion of certain citizen groups.

Communicative planning theory and striving for consensus between stakeholders through mediation have come in for extensive criticism (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Fainstein, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Hillier, 2003). Flyvbjerg (1998) critiques participation and acknowledges the inevitable presence of unequal power relations and the ability of groups to use information, calling into question the notion of non-politicised processes of mediation by urban planners and underlining the importance of conflict. The critique of consensus-seeking deliberation is that the process will most likely serve the already strong and capable elites, who will only reinforce their hegemony (Purcell, 2009, as Forester and Stitzhal warned two decades earlier; 1989). According to Hillier (2003)

and Huxley (2002), any attempt to neutralise power through facilitation is itself an imposition of specific relations of power. Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998) argue that the power of mediators to set agendas and topics for discussion, to shape the direction of discussion and to interpret the discussion's content is too broad and often left without open assessment. Tore Sager (2013, p. 21) states that planners are increasingly working in a neoliberal reality which commends transfer of authority from governments to the private sector. As a contrast to "official partisans" supporting apparent interest or community groups, practitioners can work as equity planners endorsing the interests of marginalised groups by intentionally networking with the marginal, silent and alternative groups. (Sager, 2013, pp. 70–71).

Critics of communicative planning argue that there is a gap between theory and practice and that the communicative rationale rests on too abstract a level to reach micro-level planning practices: it is more suitable to the actualisation of macro-level changes and legislative prescription than practical planning (Campbell, 2006; Campbell & Marshall, 2006; Mattila, 2017).

Despite the criticism, communicative planning theory can serve as an ideal or a parameter that offers recommendations to planning that move beyond rationalistic planning (Mattila, 2017).

## Urban Planners on Social Media

Digital methods have been trusted to solve the criticism and practical challenges of traditional participatory actions of public hearings, voting, focus groups and committees, all bound by time and space. Communicative planning demands new interaction skills from planners, and social media has provided concrete new channels and platforms for such interaction. Following online debates related to urban planning has become a part of planners' daily working practices in Finland (Niitamo & Sjöblom, 2018; Nummi, 2019). However, empirical studies concerning social media in mediation are rare, as are studies on the relation between policy-making and social media.

Social media refers to online services where the user is central to content production, sharing and other interaction (Matikainen & Villi, 2013). According to Van Dijk and Poell (2013), social media platforms have pervaded everyday life and changed ways of social interaction; they comprise the largest technological innovation in communication and inevitably change how public institutions and experts function. Communication technology offers an important medium in today's new organising in urban activism for example, (Mäenpää & Faehnle, 2017; Trapenberg Frick, 2016), representing a break from traditional citizen associations (Eranti, 2016). Facebook offers the clearest possibilities for more sustained interaction between citizens and their local authority (Bonsón et al., 2015; Ellison & Hardey, 2013). Compared to citizens in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic European countries, citizens in Nordic countries are most engaged in local governments' Facebook communications through likes, comments and shares (reflecting popularity, commitment and virality) (Bonsón et al., 2015). Out of all topics within the municipality, questions related to urban planning sparked most engagement (Bonsón et al., 2015).

Although social media has become a part of urban planning in Finland, its role remains unclear and controversial among practitioners (Niitamo & Sjöblom, 2018; Nummi, 2019). One reason seems to be the lack of policies and guidelines for fitting online discussions as part of information-handling and conflict resolution in planning. Kahila-Tani (2016) discusses the procedural character of planning where the planning process is divided into phases, in which participatory actions using digital methods are most often elusive, project-based and set to serve existing organisational needs.

Previous research identified the small numbers of users and narrow user demography as limits in online participation (Afzalan & Evans-Cowley, 2015; Lapintie & Di Marino, 2015). For example,

neighbourhood Facebook groups are not necessarily representative, and their discussions are not generally useful because only a small portion of the content is related to neighbourhood development (Afzalan & Evans-Cowley, 2015). Another problem is the weak potential of online platforms to combine discussion and problem-solving (Atzmanstorfer et al., 2014) as well as insufficient links to decision-making (Horelli et al., 2015). Nummi (2017) points out that social media can be used both as an interaction tool and a source of information in planning, and scholars should make this assessment when analysing planners' practices and motivations for social media use.

Real two-way communication and networking between residents, governments and policy-makers through social media is still scarce (Kleinhans et al., 2015). Although the potential to access the expertise of quieter voices is a key advantage in online participation approaches (Brabham, 2009; Tayebi, 2013), governments' messages have failed to reach their citizens (Kleinhans et al., 2015). Kleinhans et al. (2015) argue that wider engagement requires online engagements to materialise in real spaces of the offline world.

The limited use of communication technology in public planning institutions reflects a combination of institutional limits and planning culture traditions, along with a reluctance to make social media an integral part of a municipality's strategic plan (Hyyryläinen & Tuisku, 2016). Wary attitudes prevail towards adopting new interaction processes, especially public ones that are open to scrutiny, such as social media; local governments mainly use social media for their own representational uses to provide one-way information (Lapintie, 2017; Mergel, 2013; Niitamo & Sjöblom, 2018). Instead of being implemented from top management, policies seem to evolve retrospectively in response to mistakes, technological changes by platform providers, or observed changes of local behaviour and good experiences (Mergel, 2013). With the lack of policy concerning use of social media and following online discussions, the significance of the individual planner's own discretion and interest in utilising social media as an interaction tool is heightened.

## Urban Planning and Citizen Participation in Finland

In Finland, the municipality has a monopoly over zoning, and the Land Use and Building Act (1999/132) regulates the participation of citizens in urban planning ("Land Use and Building Act," 1999/132, 63§). The law requires municipal urban planners to develop a participation and assessment scheme that defines citizens' interaction and participation opportunities in the zoning process. According to the law, urban planners need to define the ways in which citizens and other stakeholders can take part in the process and identify the stakeholders in each process (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). The law ("Land Use and Building Decree," 1999/895) introduces minimum requirements on the duration of public displays of planning proposals and on the opportunity to comment on the planning proposals. Other than the minimum required by law, the municipality itself can determine the specific practices of participation. One typical approach is offering the opportunity to comment on the planning process.

Finland's Administrative Procedure Act (2003) regulates the work of urban planners, who are public servants. There is an equality principle (§6) in the Act that requires all citizens to be treated equally by the administration. However, to provide equal opportunities to citizens, public servants have the right to engage in positive discrimination and support minority groups and people in fragile positions (Puustinen et al., 2017a).

In Helsinki, urban planners work in the Urban Environment Division of the city organisation, and their work is politically guided by a committee. Political decision-making affects planning and affects planners' role as intermediaries. Puustinen et al. (2017b) note that Finnish legal culture

includes a political mandate for urban planners' jurisdiction based on institutional trust. The authors call the Finnish version of Forester's deliberative practitioner a "deliberative bureaucrat" who has to build trust in planning at both institutional and interpersonal levels by embracing the structural transparency and openness of the planning system and its normative goals, and by encouraging dialogue and respect for difference in individual planning processes (Puustinen et al., 2017b).

In Helsinki, online participation in urban planning is divided into different channels: formal participation processes (commenting on plans via e-mail or municipally coordinated online tools), non-binding online participation (project-based maps and questionnaires) and informal spontaneous online discussions (initiated by citizens on social media). In addition, the department informs residents about current issues via their web page and social media accounts.

Previous studies suggest that Helsinki's culture of urban planning is a mixture of traditional rationalist planning and some aspects of collaborative planning (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Lapintie, 2017), which the department's four interaction specialists are striving to enhance in the planning organisation.

## Methods and Data

The data consists of a questionnaire sent to urban planners (74 respondents, 33% of municipal planners in Helsinki) in Helsinki's Urban Environment Division in March 2017 and 3 focus group interviews with 9 participants conducted in June 2017. The questionnaire included multiple choice and open-ended questions concerning the activity and participation of the staff in online discussions related to urban planning, especially on social media. 46% of respondents worked at the detailed planning unit, 31% at the traffic and street planning unit, 15% at the strategic urban planning unit and 7% in the administration unit. The most common job titles of the respondents were architect, traffic engineer and planner.

The questionnaire asked about respondents' willingness to participate in an interview. The follow-up interviews were semi-structured, in-depth group interviews and often progressed according to topics that arose in the group discussion. The staff working with citizen interaction were over-represented in the interviews because of their occupational interest in the topic.

Our research question asked about the kinds of tensions that urban planners experienced in relation to their expected intermediating role in online discussions with citizens. In this article, we examine all data qualitatively. From it, we have identified tensions that respondents brought up when acting in online discussion environments. By tensions we mean phenomena or elements that are experienced as complicated and disputed among the urban planners. These tensions emerge in the contradiction between the ideal world of urban planning theories and planners' real-world working practices.

We used qualitative thematic analysis from the specific perspective of interpretive policy analysis as our method (Häikiö & Leino, 2014; Wagenaar, 2011) in the open-ended questionnaire questions and the transcribed group interviews. We systematically formulated thematic categorisations of the data with the help of the Atlas.ti software to identify *tensions* that affect urban planners' work as intermediaries and balancers of power. Interpretive policy analysis as a methodological approach focuses on *meanings* and how different actors' competing meanings shape the actions of people and institutions (Häikiö & Leino, 2014, p. 10).

## Analysis

Planners' intermediating role in social media is portrayed as a complex issue. Before discussing the identified tensions in the task of enhancing marginalised voices, we will briefly review what intermediating practices the planners in Helsinki are currently using to take marginalised groups into account in online (and offline) environments.

### *How Do Planners Enhance the Voices of Maginalised Citizens?*

The interviews covered social media broadly, but Facebook (FB) was the medium almost exclusively referred to by planners when discussing social media (SM). The practice they referred to most frequently was *social media listening*, where planners follow and aim to stay aware of the array of differing opinions in various FB groups and some other arenas for civic discussion (Twitter, news comment sections). On FB, planners reported interest in the topics and concerns that arose alongside their local plans. Planners place the discussions on a spectrum of what the group's agenda is seen to be, all the while being careful not to favour groups with greater capacity or a strong voice in impacting planning (the More City FB group, for example). SM listening requires reflectivity from the planner and know-how to scope conversations and balance differing views in their own work. Finally, planners may summarise SM discussions in official reports, which is reported to be a difficult task as discussions are dispersed. Planners wished for more localised SM activist groups to scope discussion for local zoning plans. SM listening is not organised or systematic and takes place according to the interests of the individual planner. Planners would welcome *social media monitoring*, that is, technical help in locating where planning conversations take place online.

Another practice, reported by planners for engaging quieter groups in planning, is *spreading information* about current plans and upcoming events in more local FB groups. This is thought to make it easier for "normal" citizens to see these infotainments (as compared to the More City group's alleged semi-professional audience). Planners may use *hybrid strategies* to enhance the reach of a digital map questionnaire by sending a postcard with the link to people's homes to encourage them to go online to answer. An important aspect here is the *quality of materials*, particularly when producing communication materials in different languages (English, Somali and Russian). Additionally, using layman language and understandable, attractive visuals to explain plans more comprehensively were valued. However, these practices are done rarely and used only when plans are considered important enough. Planners stated that they need support in assessing the social impacts (an official step in the planning process) of their plans and that human resources in the planning department could be widened to include sociologists, for example.

In addition to the online practices of SM listening and spreading information, the planners stated that *offline "interventionist" strategies* were needed to find and engage marginalised groups in planning – mentioned in this context were citizens with an immigrant background, young people and young families. These practices included embarking on foot to places where citizens are: town squares, schools, kindergartens, metro stations and malls, instead of organising a resident's evening, which people would specifically attend to discuss planning issues. Planners stated that a novelty in participation was thinking about participation through the services and spaces people use. They experienced that live meetings and "special treatment", although rare, are needed to include marginalised groups. Social media is a place where people are and where planners can "embark on foot", but planning related discussions are rare.

## Tensions of Online Discussion Use in Planning

From our data, we identified three main tensions in planners' perceptions that we further elaborate in our analysis. The tensions emerge between the planners' perceptions of *active vs. passive roles in social media, equal vs. equitable opportunities to participate* and in the *debate over allocation of resources*. In our conclusions, we will reflect on how these tensions appear in working practices and how they affect the use of information in the work of an urban planner.

### Tension 1. Active Vs. Passive Roles in Social Media

Online discussions are a new forum for urban planners to interact with citizens. The responses reflect an ongoing shift in how the role of urban planners is changing from being mere technical bureaucrats to more active civil servants who enable grassroots change in a new planning and communication landscape.

> "But planning itself is becoming more dialogical, slightly more disorganised and more difficult to manage. So, we have a very strict process for what needs to happen at each stage, a 25-stage urban planning process … but this doesn't really work in the social media realm, since planning should start with, let's think about this together and go see the locations and make comments and do Wikiplanning, and only after that start the actual process." – Strategic urban planner

This remark illustrates a liberal-advocate approach (Forester, 1989) to viewing SM as a tool for enticing relatively unorganised groups to participate. However, it shows recognition of the challenge that interacting on SM does not have a position in the official planning process.

The questionnaire responses revealed a divided reality of how planners see their own role in SM and online discussions. Although SM provides new forms of citizen participation and most respondents follow online discussions related to urban planning, only a few planners participate in discussions themselves. The questionnaire responses revealed technician views of information use in planning (Forester, 1989), with online discussions expected to supply solutions to concrete, technical problems. Many respondents saw the low level of people's technical knowledge in urban planning discussion in SM groups as a barrier to citizen interaction online.

The respondents who reported an active role said that they had no great problems in participating in SM discussions and that they did it gladly, often in their own time. An active role, however, does not mean taking part in discussions; it means following them and recognising their value for planning. They saw the growing use of SM as inevitable and demanding adaptation from planners and how their work is organised. They did not problematise SM as an insurmountable challenge but saw it as a new tool in the toolkit of a modern planner. Their description of their role reflects the broader definition of urban planning that assigns the planner the liberal-advocate role (Forester, 1989) of redressing the pitfalls of participation.

> "Not everyone is there [SM], but this is just part of the transformation of the role of a planner from this grey drafter at the office to a person who actually does things." – Strategic planner

The challenge most often cited in participating in online discussions was using planners' personal accounts; as public servants, they feel that they need to stay neutral in online discussions. This challenge was shared by planners who identified as both active and passive on SM. Questions of privacy and anonymity were often mentioned as planners' personal and work identities might diverge on a certain question and that loyalty to the employer, the municipal organisation, and the planning department's official stance had to be respected online. It was reported to be difficult to

separate professional and private identities, especially in FB discussions, where planners are registered as private citizens with their own names and photos. Respondents did not want to be personally associated with difficult planning issues in the private realm of FB. SM discussions are also "on the internet forever", and respondents were worried that comments could be used or referred to in the future, out of their original context.

> "Maybe it would seem like making excuses if I presented the plans in more detail [in SM discussions]. This is something I constantly struggle with. So far, I haven't been brave enough to say what I think. Maybe someday I will, after I've figured it out myself. But we haven't really received any instructions, other than to just discuss freely." – Detailed planner

Another challenge for planners on SM is the lack of instructions from their employer, the municipal organisation. There are neither guidelines nor explicit restrictions for acting on SM. Planners are encouraged to participate in discussions but are not given coherent practical tools or guidelines. Many respondents added that online discussions usually take place in the evenings and that they do not want to engage in lengthy debates in their free time.

The planners also reported that the atmosphere of SM discussions and the occasional low level of knowledge in discussions did not encourage them to participate. Sometimes, discussions might be hurtful on personal and emotional levels. In responses to our questionnaire and focus group interviews, one challenge identified was the experience of gender in SM conversations (and more broadly in the architect profession). In the More City group, many female planners experienced the discussions as uninviting as male participants would talk in a more hostile manner without necessarily listening to others.

> "The problem is that I kind of take some things personally. I do this work because I like it a lot and I get to do really amazing things, but I also put a lot of myself into the work. So, if someone criticises it, I tend to get offended. And not only as a civil servant but as myself. So, I easily become quite defensive, or would, so I tend to avoid it." – Detailed planner

Official municipal platforms hold more significance than SM discussions, as they are part of civil servants' official responsibilities – to respond to citizen inquiries or comments, which they follow through in an organised manner with legally binding response deadlines. The planners stated that most of the discussions actually happen elsewhere.

Planners would like the spontaneous online discussions to take place on official platforms (*Kerro Kantasi* feedback channel) to make it easier to scope discussions and include them in official reports. This reflects an incrementalist approach (Forester, 1989), where information is expected to respond to existing organisational needs. In this approach, projects would be approved with minimal delay and within the institutional framework. For the planners, SM was often seen as fitting poorly with institutional frameworks and processes. It was reported to require extensive, time-consuming work to create summaries of SM discussions in official planning documents. In addition, each planner's own professional identity and interest determine how broadly these SM discussions are followed, so discussions may be excluded from official processes, no matter how active the online discussion may have been.

The possibility of creating productive, reciprocal online conversations, in which participants can begin to understand each other's viewpoints, was questioned by respondents. This reflects the view that face-to-face meetings are key to creating common understanding and empathy towards differing views (Forester, 1989; Kleinhans et al., 2015). The planners saw SM as polarising viewpoints

and easily creating misunderstandings. Deliberative practice (Forester, 1999) was regarded as difficult in online environments.

> "It would be fruitful from the perspective of interaction if people with differing opinions spoke with each other. Although if you can't change people's attitudes, they will at least realise that people in the city can disagree on things and then the planner is there, navigating the different viewpoints, making decisions." – Strategic planner

Despite SM's many challenges and shortcomings in creating understanding, the respondents identified many advantages of SM for their work. By following SM discussions, planners gain insight into which topics might arise in citizen discussions. They learn about the arguments people are having and which topics are of greatest interest. Planners can prepare for discussions – and conflict – more easily. The respondents reported that a topic that arises on SM will usually be raised later in the planning process by a politician. In this case, SM serves a conflict-management function, a purpose often criticised by advocates of participation (Purcell, 2009). However, interaction specialists remarked that they can prepare offline discussion events around topics that arise in neighbourhood FB groups, for instance, and thus serve local residents.

The respondents noted that there are only a few active SM discussion groups (all on Facebook) and many small ones that are not active and not regularly followed by planners. The gain identified from SM is the potentially large number of participants: the online "audience". In citizen-initiated FB groups like the More City group, discussion is lively and abundant, with a large audience. This type of discussion was identified as difficult to initiate on the municipality's official FB accounts and participation platforms. Respondents saw that young adults were easier to involve through social media than they had previously been and that surveys were easier to share through social media. The benefits of SM were verbalised using the logic of traditional one-way communication rather than taking advantage of the reciprocal interactive logic of social media (Van Dijk & Poell, 2013). The level of deliberation is thus not necessarily deepened on social media.

The informants with a more optimistic (instead of problematising) stance towards SM discussions saw that SM has given a platform for YIMBYism ("yes in my backyard", or positive urban activism) and made positive, pro-urban citizen discussion visible to urban planners in a new way. Respondents saw that SM, such as the More City Facebook group, has brought urbanists together as a balancing force against more traditional NIMBY ("not in my backyard") groups with a defined agenda, usually involving rejecting city densification plans and cuts in green areas. The planners finally have a group that supports the municipality's city densification programme and plans; it even demands denser building than the municipality envisages. YIMBY activism was seen as troublesome if it gained significant attention in official planning, because citizens with high social and knowledge capital are usually regarded as the ones taking part in active online discussions. This may possibly create an imbalance that neglects the opinions of quieter citizens and those not present online.

## Tension 2. Equal Vs. Equitable Opportunities to Participate

The second tension in our data concerns the planners' views of citizen participation. The idea of enhancing citizen participation in urban planning is a key imperative of the city's strategy (City of Helsinki, 2017), legislation (MRL 1999/132, 63§) and communicative planning theory (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Forester, 1999; Healey, 1992). The aim is to bring as many participants as possible into the planning process, especially those who are affected by the plans, such as the residents of

a certain area. However, there are different views among the planners on the interaction practices that can meet the citizen participation goal.

According to the data, urban planners are aware of their own power position in reaching participants, but they generally regard the official participation channels that are open to everyone as sufficient to ensure equal possibilities to participate, with special arrangements for marginalised groups to reach equity only rarely needed (see Abdullah et al., 2016). However, some planners questioned their neutral role.

For the planners, the intermediating role includes the goal of treating all citizens and neighbourhoods equally and emphasising the common good and the big picture in planning However, at times the need for equity is present in the conversation as well.

"Because we have to have equal treatment in planning in the sense that … we can't do it in such a way that if these communities are opposed to something and other communities are not, that we just don't do anything in those communities where people are against it. We need to be able to look at the big picture and acknowledge that if there hasn't been any opposition to a district or a plan, it might be because that community or those people don't have the same kinds of resources." – Strategic urban planner

"M1: And the way this conversation is had so both are in their bubbles, and we are already there from the start, excluding [chuckles] so –

F1: But maybe planners and city officials could play a role in bringing these two extremes together.

M2: We can't even expect that these groups would independently start to reconcile their values, because that's not their job.

M1: No.

F1: Mmm, that's our job." – Strategic planner (M1), strategic urban planner (F1), traffic planner (M2)

Some planners admitted that it is easier to cooperate with people who can offer constructive solutions rather than only resistance. Then, a real dialogue is possible.

"I at least try to give everyone the same treatment. But I have to admit that if they have some type of understanding or expertise so that they understand what's being talked about or how these processes go or what kinds of things are done at each stage … or if they're bringing solutions and not just opposition, better solutions than I perhaps have been able to offer, then I will have a more positive reaction." – Urban planner, architect

Spatial representativeness was discussed, with planners offering different views on how spatially representative the input of the citizens should be.

"If we go to a community where no one is the least bit interested, do we want to invest a lot of effort into getting at least someone to participate when in another community there are a hundred people who are willing to contribute if they are given the opportunity?" – Strategic planner

The obligation of planners to garner the attention of citizens and inspire them to participate was questioned. Enhancing the participation of marginalised groups was not seen as a priority.

"Are we responsible? And how much resources do we put into activating, energising, supporting or coaching those people who are not at all active? How many languages do we need to translate our materials into or, how about small children? Or is it enough that we go and engage secondary school students about the future, or should we go to kindergartens as well? [chuckles]" – Strategic planner

SM and other online participation channels were not regarded as a key environment for gaining insights into voices that the respondents saw as traditionally missing from planning: young people, immigrants, young families and people with low education and income. However, some planners reported that SM has at least offered the potential to engage voices that have usually been left out from the official processes.

> "I kind of think that social media has democratised it to a large extent in the sense that, back in the old days [chuckles], there were the educated and well-to-do and in that sense organised communities and their associations which were active; now, in a sense, any group can generate discussion and raise issues kind of in the same way." – Strategic planner

According to the respondents, listening to the voices of marginalised groups in planning requires special situations. Participatory work should be well thought out and carefully organised. This is more intense work than following or even participating in SM discussions, which respondents regarded as not representing the views of marginalised citizen groups. Listening to marginalised groups requires offline meetings in the physical environment and the planners going to neighbourhoods and citizens' lived spaces, such as schools, libraries, supermarkets and youth centres.

The interviewees shared the view that these extra efforts were crucial *when* involving marginalised groups, although some interviewees questioned *why* these marginalised groups should be engaged more intensively, as they did not see the marginalised or special groups as necessarily interested in participating themselves.

The respondents identified certain institutional barriers to hearing the voices of marginalised groups. The planning schedules and time frames for citizen interaction and the opportunity to comment on completed plans were regarded as very narrow. In only a few weeks, a citizen might be expected to see the announcement of a plan, read it, understand it, react to it, attend a meeting and leave a well-formed comment or opinion on it. The planners viewed this schedule as too challenging for engaging marginalised groups in the official process.

When comparing the findings to Forester's (1989) planning approach types, we see that although the planners' attitudes towards enabling participation are progressive, the real-world planning process does not support that approach well. The result is that planning is often carried out in an incrementalist fashion. Based on the data, the role of planners in Helsinki appears more like a neutral bureaucrat than a civic friend. Liberal-advocate (Forester, 1989) actions were viewed as difficult. Deliberative practice (Forester, 1999) is biased, because only certain types of citizens are reached.

### Tension 3. Debate over Allocation of Resources

The third identified tension in acting as a power balancer in online discussions is the debate over how limited resources should be allocated in the planning organisation. Planners viewed tight schedules and the limited number of staff working with citizen interaction as obstacles; this helps explain why planners do not follow or participate in social media discussions more often and more thoroughly.

Resources for engaging marginal groups in discussion would require greater effort: producing materials in different languages, following up actions on social media with face-to-face encounters and offering a space for participation with technical equipment and high-quality, easily understandable, curated visual content on neighbourhood plans. Furthermore, some planners thought

that the existing resources should be allocated to actual planning work rather than citizen interaction.

The respondents found it difficult to discern which social media discussions to follow and summarise in the official process reports, as they have limited time resources for following social media discussions. Instead, several planners reported focusing solely on the municipality's official platforms to maintain a logical and ostensibly equal strategy to handle social media discussions. They did not want to favour certain social media groups over others.

They saw that the More City Facebook group had adopted the strategy of writing summaries of the group's discussions and sending them to the municipality's official participation platforms, where the planners are required to react to and follow up on comments. Planners must account for those comments in their official interaction reports.

Insufficient resources steer planning in an incrementalist (Forester, 1989) direction, and deliberative practice (Forester, 1999), when it comes to listening to different stakeholders, is often only partial.

> "It's also a practical question because you can't follow everything and take in all the information, and process it in the format we use to handle feedback. You face the question of equality; which groups should we follow, and which groups' output should we include in the feedback, and how about those groups that we don't even know anything about? – Strategic planner

> You could also say that it's a good thing that our own channels such as "Voice your opinion" are not that active. If we had a thousand people discussing each of the hundred ongoing zoning projects, we would be in trouble." – Strategic planner

Another institutional barrier that planners experienced was the current administrative reform, in which 31 departments have been restructured into 5 divisions. Along with the reform, staff resources in the form of communication personnel are to be cut by a third.

> "That concerns me a little bit in terms of my own work. Who knows which social media forums we will be chatting on? So, we will have to do a lot of prioritisation in the future in terms of which projects and things we want to be involved in and which we won't." – Strategic planner

## Conclusions

In this study, we have examined how urban planners see their own role in online discussions with citizens. As a theoretical framework, we have applied Forester's (1989, 1999) normative concepts of intermediary and balancer of power to examine urban planners' working practices and use of information in online environments to study whether acting on social media is an example of communicative planning or not. We argue that the perceptions of urban planners reveal tensions between their active vs. passive roles in social media, equal vs. equitable opportunities to participate and in the debate over allocation of resources, all of which have effects on online citizen participation.

Digital technology and social media have changed the operational environment of communicative planning and opened new dimensions in the critique of communicative planning theory (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Flyvbjerg, 1998) from the perspective of equality and equity in participation (Abdullah et al., 2016). Intermediating is possible between active groups with politically different agendas, but it appears that marginalised groups are not being reached in online environments. Social media listening and spreading information are the main practices, but

finding and engaging marginalised groups would require offline interventionist strategies, such as embarking on foot to places where citizens use everyday services. Social media is not portrayed as an environment to conveniently "embark on foot", other than to observe and analyse differing views.

The tensions identified in this study affect planners' capacity to use and distribute information among groups in the planning process, especially in supporting the participation of marginalised groups (Table 1). Forester's five planning approaches – technician, incrementalist, liberal-advocate, structuralist and progressive – to how planners can use information as a source of power were present in the planners' remarks about their role. (Forester, 1989, pp. 29–31). The *technician approach* emerged when planners participated in conversations to clarify technical misunderstandings or misinformation that had been circulated. Most of the accounts on intermediating fell into the *incrementalist approach*, where communication with citizens responds to organisational needs. Planners can learn and prepare for topics of growing citizen interest by analysing social media discussions and using social media as an agile channel for disseminating information. By listening to social media discussion, planners may observe and understand the imbalances between citizens, which requires (and may also enhance) a deliberative role. For instance, they recognised that different methods entice different people to participate: well-off citizens participate within the planning framework and people in socio-economically weaker positions do not, especially online, and that live interactions are needed to have discussions with marginalised groups. Although this understanding is reflected in the planners' accounts, no systematic intermediating practices exist in balancing the imbalance. There is therefore a *risk of bias* in discussing with the already active citizens and neighbourhoods online. With scant resources, there is a danger that only those who are vocal about their opinions in informal social media channels and know how to participate in the municipality's formal channels have a say in planning, and the quiet voices are left to the side. Planners are aware of this tendency and spatial segregation in general, but do not necessarily have the tools to create equitable situations for marginalised groups to participate.

Our results reinforce previous studies indicating that digital technology and social media alone do not help bring marginalised voices into urban planning processes (Lapintie, 2017; Lapintie & Di Marino, 2015). Our data showed that planners are aware of the need to adopt a more *liberal-advocate approach*, in which the planners' information can be used to enable under-represented or relatively unorganised groups to participate more effectively in the planning process. In a technical sense, social media could work as a deliberative platform for citizen interaction and intensify public deliberation; to date, however, it is not meeting that goal.

Interaction on social media does not seem to fit into the planners' daily working practices (Hyyryläinen & Tuisku, 2016; Niitamo & Sjöblom, 2018; Nummi, 2019). Municipal planners are not

Table 1. Empirical findings of practices and tensions in relation to different approaches to information as a source of power (Forester, 1989).

| Mediating practices in online discussions | Approaches to information use (Forester, 1989) |
| --- | --- |
| Correcting misinformation | Technician approach |
| Social media listening | Incrementalist approach |
| Tension: Planner's active vs. passive role | |
| Spreading information | Liberal-advocate approach |
| Tension: Providing equal vs. equitable opportunities | |
| Offline interventionist strategies | Structuralist approach |
| Tension: Debate over allocation of funds, human resources | |
| | Progressive approach |

required to follow or participate in online discussions on social media. The role of online discussions in social media in planning processes is vague and arises from citizen initiatives. Individual planners decide whether to follow or participate in them. The conversations on social media are not systematically reported in the planning material, unless a planner chooses to include a summary in the interaction reports. Challenges to participation in social media include perceived personal online identity, privacy, a lack of organisational support and the culture of social media. As a preliminary solution, urban planners might be granted the opportunity to use anonymised "Area planner" accounts on social media to separate their work identities from their private ones. Social media could be an applicable platform for communicative planning, but urban planners are acting there in a rather incrementalistic way. The studies of social media in communicative planning should also be part of planning education.

Because social media discussions do not have institutional status in the planning process, their impact on actual planning is unclear and difficult to measure. However, they do appear relevant and may influence public opinion and thus the views of politicians. Legitimising the role of social media discussions in the planning process could only increase the number of participants in those discussions.

## Notes on Contributors

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