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# Communication Technology and Public Participation in Urban Planning: Who is speaking up in Austin and who is listening?

Amos Stoltzfus

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**COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND PUBLIC  
PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING: WHO IS SPEAKING  
UP IN AUSTIN AND WHO IS LISTENING**

by

**AMOS STOLTZFUS**

**B.A. SOCIOLOGY, MESSIAH COLLEGE (PA), MAY 2003**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Community & Regional Planning**

The University of New Mexico  
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**May 2013**

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May we all join the struggle to change ourselves by changing our cities.

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**ABSTRACT**

Public participation has enjoyed a long, if embattled, history in the field of urban planning in the U.S. Although mandated by federal, state and local regulations, designing processes for meaningful public participation has proven difficult for both practical and political reasons. Recognizing the inadequacies of traditional participation methods – particularly in strengthening democracy, valuing local knowledge and pursuing social justice - many planning practitioners and participation theorists held high aspirations for the potential of communication technology in the networked world of Web 2.0 to transform the role of the public in improving the quality of urban environments. Although research in the analysis of online political discourse remains in a nascent form, evaluations of online communication have relied heavily on the conceptual work of Jürgen Habermas and the ideals of deliberative democracy. Seeking to build on this research, I employ communicative action theory and urban social movement theory, along with research on low threshold participation activities,

to develop criteria for *meaningful* public participation. These criteria consider both the process and outcome of participation.

Using a qualitative ethnographic case study approach, I apply the criteria for meaningful public participation to the City of Austin's website, [www.speakupaustin.org](http://www.speakupaustin.org). The City of Austin has been developing SpeakUpAustin over the past two years as a place where the public can provide input on plans, share ideas about improvements to the city and engage in dialogue with other residents and City staff. I gathered data through profiles of website users, focus groups with Austin residents, interviews of City staff and content analysis of website discourse. I conclude this paper with recommendations for improving the effectiveness of this participation tool in the areas of characteristics of participants, discourse of participation, participation opportunities and participation outcomes. Although specific to the City of Austin, the findings of this research have implications for a broad range of efforts to utilize communication technology to promote meaningful public participation.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ..... 1**

**THESIS OUTLINE ..... 6**

**CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY ..... 8**

**DATA COLLECTION ..... 8**

**DATA ANALYSIS ..... 13**

**CHAPTER THREE ..... 15**

**HISTORY OF PARTICIPATION PRACTICE AND THEORY ..... 15**

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: DEFINITION AND PURPOSE ..... 15**

**EARLY HISTORY OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE U.S. .... 18**

**CRITIQUES OF EARLY PARTICIPATION EFFORTS..... 24**

**CHAPTER FOUR: ROLE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN URBAN  
PLANNING..... 37**

**EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY ..... 37**

**CONCLUSION ..... 49**

**CHAPTER 5: MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION CRITERIA..... 51**

**OBSTACLES TO MEANINGFUL CITIZEN PARTICIPATION ..... 51**

**MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION CRITERIA..... 53**



CONCLUSION .....	56
<b><u>CHAPTER SIX: CASE STUDY FINDINGS.....</u></b>	<b>58</b>
WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT.....	58
USER DEMOGRAPHICS .....	65
FOCUS GROUP & INTERVIEW THEMES .....	71
WEBSITE DISCOURSE.....	83
<b><u>CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION .....</u></b>	<b>92</b>
ANALYSIS.....	92
RECOMMENDATIONS .....	99
CONCLUSION .....	110
<b><u>CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS &amp; FUTURE RESEARCH</u></b>	<b>112</b>
LIMITATIONS .....	114
FUTURE RESEARCH .....	115
REFERENCES .....	117

## Chapter One: Introduction

Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because and only when, they are created by everybody.  
(Jacobs, 1961, p. 238)

Since its inception in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field of urban planning in the U.S. has addressed the physical, natural and social forces that shape the city. Throughout this history, public participation has been part of the urban planning landscape. However, just as the shape and role of cities have changed over the past century in response to changing economies, technologies and climates, the role of participation in urban planning has also changed, responding to calls for greater democratization of the planning process, criticism of expert knowledge and concerns about marginalized communities (Sandercock, 2005).

In this thesis, I describe a trend that is shifting planning from a top-down profession driven by technical expertise and “objectivity” to a more collaborative, bottom-up approach focused on process, inclusivity and deliberation (Healey, 2003; Innes & Booher, 2004). This shift, which has not been embraced by all planning practitioners and theorists, requires planners to act, not as technocrats, but as organizers and facilitators of a process designed to engage a broad, diverse group of stakeholders to identify common interests and mutual goals (Healey, 2003). Communication technology, particularly through the medium of the Internet, has followed a similar trend, moving from static, expert-created websites to interactive, user-generated content. The new iteration of the Internet – commonly referred to as Web 2.0 – allows users to engage with each other and to share information in ways that were previously impossible (Chadwick, 2008).

The convergence of these trends is changing the way practitioners and participants approach urban planning by making information more accessible, increasing the convenience of participation and improving government transparency (Leininger, n.d.). Many planning practitioners and participation theorists had high aspirations that innovations in communication technology would fundamentally transform the role of the public and the public's relationship with government (Dalhberg, 2001). However, questions remain about the extent to which participation in urban planning has changed. Do contemporary participation methods that utilize communication technology allow more of the public to enjoy greater influence in decisions that shape the city? Or does the status quo of technical expertise continue to rule the day?

This thesis explores the history of participation practice and theory to discover elements of public participation in urban planning that are *meaningful* – that is, that hold some value to those participating both in terms of their experiences and in the degree to which participation influences planning outcomes. Having identified elements of meaningful participation, I then apply them as criteria to the participation opportunities facilitated through [www.speakupaustin.org](http://www.speakupaustin.org) (referred to as SpeakUpAustin in this thesis), a public participation website for the City of Austin, Texas, to examine the potential of communication technology to create space for meaningful public participation.

My approach to this research topic is influenced by the values of the “Right to the City” movement, first introduced by the French urbanist, Henri Lefebvre (1992), and later expanded by the geographer, David Harvey (2008).

As Sandercock (2005) explains,

The right to the city always implied more than the right of access to and use of the central city by those who could not afford to live there. It implied the right to influence the form and development of the city and the meaning of place (that is, the right to a voice) as well as the right to transgress bourgeois forms of urban life and to rebel against the rationalized and alienated patterns of everyday life dictated by the capitalist machine and to reassert the importance of play, spontaneity and festivity. (p. 437-438)

This quote implies several key concepts that guide my research. First, participation in the development of the city is a basic right of those who interact with the city – not an amenity afforded a certain class of people. Second, professions that are integrally involved in the development of urban environments (my focus is on the profession of urban planning) have a responsibility to ensure the inclusion of those individuals and groups who have historically been excluded from decisions made about the city. Finally, the process of changing cities is often the result of a struggle over competing values and resources – and, as such, it is a political act. For the purpose of my research, I assert this struggle not only influences the physical space of the city but also extends to virtual public spaces where decisions about the city are considered.

My goal in writing this thesis is to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the efficacy of public participation in urban planning and to explore the potential of communication technology to dispel some of the ghosts that have haunted participation efforts throughout the history of urban planning in the U.S. To do this, I attempt to address two central questions:

- 1) What constitutes *meaningful* public participation in urban planning?

2) How can communication technology be used to create space for *meaningful* participation?

In the past twenty years, many theorists researching public participation as an exercise of democracy, particularly through the medium of communication technology, have turned to the ideals of public deliberation and deliberative democracy, often influenced by the work of the philosopher and communication theorist, Jürgen Habermas (Delli Carpini, Cooks & Jacobs, 2004; Freelon, 2010). Habermas (1989) addressed the role of the public sphere where issues of public interest, such as politics or economics, could be deliberated. Deliberation is defined as “discussion on issues of public importance that involves judicious argument, critical listening, and earnest decision making” (Delli Carpini, Cooks & Jacobs, 2004, p. 317). Planning theorists, such as Patsy Healey (2003) and Judith Innes (2004), have adapted the Habermasian concept of the public sphere to provide guidelines for participation in planning. Ideally, the outcomes of deliberation in urban planning processes influence decisions made about the city (Forrester, 1996; Hillier, 2005).

In examining the components that make participation meaningful, my intent is to build on the tenets of deliberation, which I believe provide a helpful framework for the discussion of public issues, but also to expand the concept of meaningful participation in the context of communication technology by including low threshold methods of online participation, such as “liking” or voting for an idea (Chadwick, 2008), and the participation strategies employed by urban social movements (Castells, 1983). Although these activities do not meet the

requirements of deliberation, I argue that they can be meaningful activities in the development of the city for certain groups of people.

To answer the two questions stated above, I explore literature related to participation in urban planning as well as the history of the practice, which describes several important aspects of participation, including the purpose; the traditional methods that have been used by planners; the evolution of the role of the public in planning and the major critiques of participation efforts. I investigate this background information to gain insights into how planners have adopted more contemporary methods of participation, in particular the use of communication technology, in an attempt to address some of the inadequacies of traditional methods, such as the public hearing and citizen advisory councils (Innes & Booher, 2004). This information provides a basis for my meaningful participation criteria, which address the characteristics of participants, the political discourse of the participants, the types of participation opportunities and the impact of participation on outcomes of the planning process.

In my view, meaningful participation:

- Promotes deliberation among a diverse group of participants;
- Provides convenient ways of participating and remaining engaged;
- Values the knowledge of participants;
- Is accessible to all stakeholders, particularly to those from marginalized communities;
- Utilizes the results of participation in planning decisions.

Using these components as criteria, I evaluate the effectiveness of SpeakUpAustin, an online forum designed to provide opportunities for the public to participate in the development of the city of Austin, Texas. Through SpeakUpAustin, users can post ideas about improvements they would like to see in the city, vote for ideas they support, engage in conversation with other users, access information about City projects and provide input into plans being developed by the City. Using data gathered from profiles of SpeakUpAustin users, focus groups with Austin residents, interviews with City staff and content analysis of online discussions, I analyze the extent to which participation opportunities afforded through SpeakUpAustin meet the criteria I have identified for meaningful participation – and provide recommendations for ways to improve this participation tool.

These recommendations include clarifying the purpose of the website, facilitating conversations to encourage dialogue, making the website more accessible to more people, increasing the transparency of the site and making a stronger connection between SpeakUpAustin and decisions made by the City.

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter two provides a description of the methodology used to approach this research topic, comprised of a literature review and interviews, focus groups and content analysis for an ethnographic case study - the City of Austin's website, SpeakUpAustin. Chapter three describes the history of participation practice and theory in urban planning. Chapter four provides a brief

description of the evolution of communication technology and its role in urban planning. Chapter five outlines four obstacles for participation and provides the criteria for meaningful participation. Chapter six describes the findings of my case study, including the demographics of website users, content analysis of two website discussions and the themes found in focus groups and interviews. Using the meaningful participation criteria as a lens, chapter seven provides a discussion of my case study findings, including analysis and recommendations for changes that may increase the effectiveness of SpeakUpAustin as a public participation tool. Finally, chapter eight concludes this thesis and briefly discusses the limitations of this study and opportunities for additional research.



## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

The overall goal of this thesis is: 1) to identify components of public participation in urban planning that make it a meaningful exercise both in terms of participants' experiences and in its influence on planning outcomes and 2) to explore the role of communication technology in creating space for meaningful participation in urban planning.

### **Data Collection**

The methods of data collection include a review of literature to determine criteria for meaningful participation in urban planning and an application of those criteria to a specific case study, the City of Austin's public participation website, SpeakUpAustin (Figure 1).

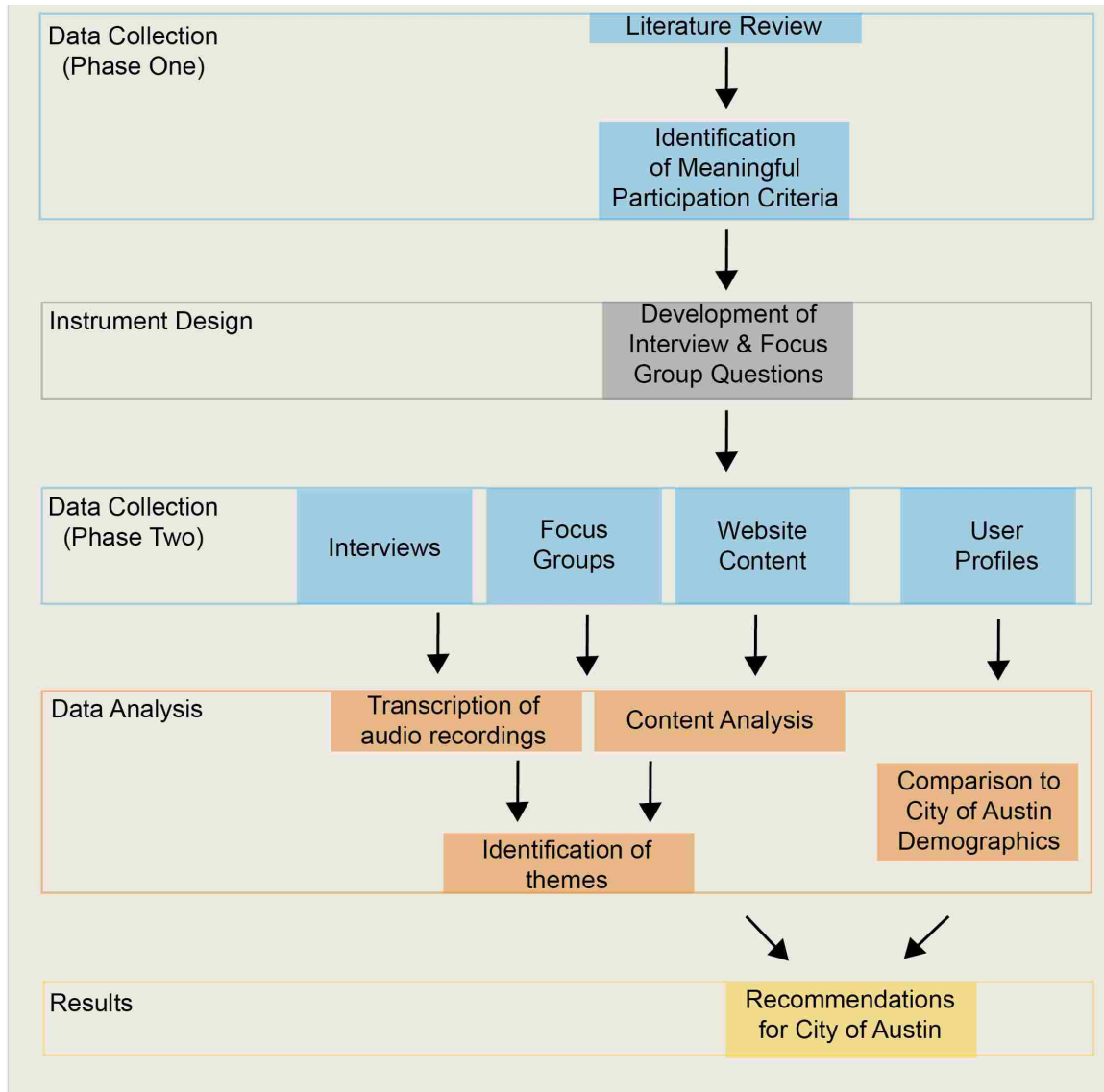


Figure 1: Diagram of Methodology

## Literature Review

The literature review relies primarily on research from the fields of urban planning, political science, public administration, urban sociology and communications. I begin with a brief explanation of the importance of participation to the success of urban planning as a profession and establish the definition of public participation used for this research. I then describe the role of

participation in the history of urban planning, beginning with the City Beautiful movement during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the 1970's. This history of public participation demonstrates both its strengths as an exercise of democracy and the challenges to facilitating participation that provides value to participants and affects planning outcomes. Following an outline of the history, I describe three responses to early participation efforts: a crisis of representative democracy, a critique of expert knowledge and a concern for social justice. My literature review also outlines the evolution of the Internet and its implications for public participation in urban planning.

### **Case Study**

The City of Austin was chosen as the case study for this research for several reasons. First, Austin has enjoyed a long history of active citizen participation in planning activities. For example, Austin's comprehensive planning process in the late 1980's, called "Austinplan", "used one of the most extensive citizen-based comprehensive planning processes ever attempted" (Beatley, Brower & Lucy, 1994, p. 194). Over the years, the City of Austin has become more sophisticated in its public participation techniques, exploring the potential of social networking and "micro-blogging" to get more people engaged in planning processes (Evans-Crowley, 2011). Toward this end, Austin has been developing SpeakUpAustin over the past two years as a place where the public can provide input on plans, share ideas about improvements to the city and engage in dialogue with other residents and City staff.

In addition, the Community Engagement Consultant for the City of Austin expressed interest in collaborating in my research efforts and was willing to assist in arranging logistics and providing access to website users and City staff.

This research was designed to explore the effectiveness of SpeakUpAustin as a public participation tool through the perspectives of Austin city residents and City staff. In order to better understand these perspectives, I designed a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups, along with a content analysis of website discussions. Questions for interviews and focus groups were based on the meaningful participation criteria identified through the literature review. These questions focused on four areas:

1. The characteristics of website users.
2. The quality and character of the discourse participants engaged in.
3. Participation opportunities offered by the website.
4. The outcomes of participation.

I visited Austin twice – in November of 2012 and again in December. The focus groups were scheduled in advance of these visits. To recruit focus group participants, the Community Engagement Consultant for the City of Austin emailed an invitation to all registered users of SpeakUpAustin, instructing interested participants to contact me. In addition, the Community Engagement Consultant identified City staff who have job-related responsibilities associated with SpeakUpAustin. I then contacted these staff to see if they were interested in participating in my research and if so, to schedule an interview. I encouraged

participants in focus groups and interviews to inform others who they thought may be interested in the research to contact me. This was an attempt to use snowball sampling to recruit additional perspectives outside of the mass recruitment email.

Twenty-five people participated in four focus groups – each of which lasted for approximately two hours. In three of the four focus groups, an employee of Granicus, the company that owns the platform for SpeakUpAustin, joined me as a co-researcher. In addition to focus groups, I interviewed five either current or former City staff from the Communications and Planning departments. I also interviewed two employees of Sentient Services, the company that originally built the website. In both interviews and focus groups, several initial questions were explored – and other questions were added as needed to better understand the perspectives of participants. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. During the transcription process, I removed all personally identifiable information in order to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

In addition to interviews and focus groups, I conducted a content analysis of the discourse associated with two topics posted on SpeakUpAustin – an idea for a bike share program submitted by a website user and a discussion about a potential plastic bag ban posted by City staff. These topics were identified with assistance from the Community Engagement Consultant and represented issues that were of particular interest to City residents based on the number of posts.

Finally, in order to better understand who does and does not use this website, I considered demographic information of registered users – and when possible compared those demographics to the general demographics of the city of Austin. I accessed the demographic information through the completed profiles of users, provided by Granicus. When people register for SpeakUpAustin, they are encouraged to complete a personal profile, which asks questions about ethnicity, education levels, income levels, etc. I chose to include five characteristics in my analysis: age, educational attainment, ethnicity, Internet usage and interest in city government. It is important to note that users are not required to answer these profile questions, and only 30% of all users have completed their user profiles.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data collected for this thesis in three ways. I compared users' demographic data to the demographics of the city of Austin. In addition, I coded transcriptions of interviews and focus groups to reveal themes. Finally, I categorized elements of the discourse from two discussions posted on SpeakUpAustin.

I compared three demographic characteristics – age, ethnicity and educational attainment - of website users who had completed their profiles to the larger population of Austin, using data from the 2010 Census and 2007-2011 American Community Survey (ACS) accessed through American Fact Finder II. I chose these three characteristics because the questions were structured similarly to the Census and ACS questions, allowing for easy comparison. In addition, I

considered two other characteristics of website users, Internet usage and interest in City government. Although these characteristics cannot be compared to the larger population of Austin, they provide important additional information about some of the people who are using the website.

To analyze data collected from focus groups and interviews, I transcribed audio recordings using transcription software “F5”. I then analyzed the transcribed interviews and focus groups with qualitative data analysis software called “MaxQDA”. This software allowed for indexing sections of the interviews and focus groups through the creation of a series of codes and then provided several ways to explore the relationship of the codes in order to uncover recurring themes across the data. From this, I was able to identify emerging themes, which I then used to propose recommendations for the city of Austin.

I also used MaxQDA to analyze content from two discussions on SpeakUpAustin. I categorized elements of the discourse from these two discussions according to the indicative metrics for democratic discourse described by Freelon (2010).

## **Chapter Three**

### **History of Participation Practice and Theory**

Since urban planning is a multi-disciplinary field, the literature described in this section is informed by a variety of disciplines, including planning, sociology, political science, public administration, communications, geography and economics. The goal of this literature review is to track a shift in participation practice and theory by describing the history of participation in urban planning from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through the 1970's. This history demonstrates the failure of many participation efforts to engage all stakeholders, to value local expertise and to promote social justice. I conclude this section with several critiques of early participation efforts, which, I argue, hold valuable lessons for planners in designing meaningful participation processes.

#### **Public Participation: Definition and Purpose**

Before delving into the history of participation in urban planning, it is necessary to establish a working definition and to outline the purpose of participation in planning efforts. The lack of a uniform definition has muddled theoretical and empirical inquiries into the field of participation (Day, 1997). Participation has been used to describe a wide variety of processes for a variety of purposes, creating challenges to evaluation across practices and to the identification of best practices.

Arnstein (1969) offered this definition:



It [citizen participation] is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the politics and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots 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 benefits of the affluent society. (p. 216)

Arnstein emphasizes the social justice aspect of planning – a theme that will be explored later in this chapter; however, not all planners agree that participation is fundamentally a redistribution of power (Goodspeed, 2008). Roberts (2004, p. 320) offers a slightly broader definition, stating that participation is the “process by which members of a society (those not holding office or administrative positions in government) share power with public officials in making substantive decisions and in taking actions related to the community.” The definition of participation offered by Phillips and Orsini (2002) captures the essence of participation as it is viewed in this research. Public participation is the “interactive and iterative processes characterized by deliberations among citizens with the purpose of contributing, in meaningful ways, to specific public policy decisions in a transparent and accountable manner (p. 253).” This thesis uses Phillips and Orsini’s definition because it highlights the importance of deliberation between members of the public (and presumably, between the public and planners) and emphasizes the impact, not only the process, of participation.

Public participation is often used synonymously with several other terms, including “civic engagement” and “citizen participation”. In this thesis, I use public participation for several reasons. First, civic engagement is closely associated with Robert Putnam’s (1995) work on social capital and is often somewhat

narrowly limited to activities such as voting, volunteering and membership in civic organizations (Cohen, 2001). Similarly, citizen participation assumes a formal relationship with the state. Although this may often be the case in government mandated participation efforts, this term excludes non-citizens and those who not wish to view themselves in relation to the state. I believe the term public participation offers a broader category of participation and is most closely connected to the concept of civil society, which is defined as “the collective organization of individuals operating autonomously of the systems of state and market” (cited in Nettler, 2004, p. 8).

Urban planning is a place-based profession, often chiefly concerned with the form of the physical environment – roads, buildings, parks, public spaces – in a particular place and the methods, processes and policies that produce a place. Although urban planning is closely connected to the physical environment of the city, Davidoff (1965) reminds us that the physical environment is only a representation of other structures:

Physical relations and conditions have no meaning or quality apart from the way they serve their users. But this is forgotten every time a physical condition is described as good or bad without relation to a specified group of users. High density, low density, green belts, mixed uses, cluster developments, centralized or decentralized business centers are per se neither good nor bad. They describe physical relations or conditions but take on value only when seen in terms of their social, economic, psychological, physiological, or aesthetic effects on different users. (p. 557)

In a capitalist economy, places have both a private exchange value and a public use value. Places are bought and sold by private entities, but they are also experienced and used by the public. Public participation in urban planning

decisions is necessary to ensure the public benefits from the quality of a place (Nettler, 2004; Logan & Molotch, 1987).

To that end, researchers and practitioners have identified a number of reasons for including the public in urban planning processes. Innes and Booher (2005) summarize these reasons in five purposes for participation:

- 1) To find out public preferences;
- 2) To incorporate local expertise;
- 3) To advance fairness and justice;
- 4) To get legitimacy for public decisions and;
- 5) To fulfill the requirements of the law.

Critical of traditional participation methods, such as public hearings and citizen advisory councils, the authors contend that most methods typically only meet the last requirement. Desiring to increase the effectiveness of participation methods, the authors propose two additional purposes for participation: to build civil society – as the space where decisions about “use value” can be negotiated - and to "create an adaptive, self-organizing polity" (Innes and Booher, 2005; Nettler, 2004). These additional purposes for public participation will be considered in the meaningful participation criteria discussed in chapter six.

### **Early History of Public Participation in the U.S.**

Public participation has enjoyed a long, if embattled, history in the field of urban planning in the U.S. (Day, 1997; Fagence, 1977; Goodspeed, 2008). The history of government-mandated participation provides a description of the evolution of participation’s role in urban planning, as well as the role of the

planner. As Goodspeed (2008) notes, participation's history demonstrates the ongoing "tension between planning's technical expertise and democratic aspiration" (p. 22) and also emphasizes the often-sizeable distance between the ideals of participation and the lived reality.

The earliest forms of public participation in planning were primarily designed to get buy-in from citizens on plans that had already been developed. In the early 1900's, on the heels of the Chicago World Fair, Daniel Burnham, a prominent architect and leader of the City Beautiful movement, created the first comprehensive plan in the U.S., the *Plan of Chicago*. In these early years of urban planning, municipalities did not yet have the legal right to implement plans through zoning and planning commissions (Goodspeed, 2008). Therefore, private citizens, primarily business leaders of the day, largely drove the plan itself, establishing the precedent for citizen planning commissions (cited in Day, 1997).

The plan attempted to resolve many of the problems facing the city at a time of industrialization. However, advocates of the plan recognized that it could not be implemented without the broad support of Chicago residents, who would need to approve the bonds used to finance the recommendations. To that end, a simplified version, which included lay language and illustrations, was mailed to residents. In addition, Plan of Chicago sponsors developed lectures and a documentary to encourage resident support (Krueckeberg, 1983). Although these activities do not meet the standards for meaningful public participation identified

in this thesis, the founders of urban planning in the U.S. acknowledged the need for community support of planning initiatives.

Following the lead of the *Plan of Chicago*, community leaders began developing plans in many cities across the U.S. However, the role of municipalities, who lacked the authority to enforce plans, remained limited. This changed with the landmark U.S. Supreme Court Case, *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Company*, 272 U.S. 365, which affirmed the right of municipalities to regulate land use as part of their police powers (Goodspeed, 2008).

The *Village of Euclid* case led the U.S. Department of Commerce to circulate two model acts: the Standard Zoning Enabling Act of 1926 and Standard City Planning Enabling Act of 1929 (Goodspeed, 2008). The adoption of these acts by state governments allowed cities to enforce zoning regulations and implement plans. The Standard Zoning Enabling Act of 1926 mandated a form of public participation in early planning efforts, requiring a public hearing before creating land use regulations “at which parties in interest and citizens shall have an opportunity to be heard” (p. 7). Likewise, the Standard City Planning Enabling Act of 1929 required at least one public hearing with advance notice through a newspaper advertisement. These acts represent a degree of progress in public participation - from solely informative activities aimed at achieving buy-in to designated space for the public to express their opinions.

Similarly, the Comprehensive Planning Enabling Act of 1928, which permitted state jurisdictions to create comprehensive plans, required at least one

public hearing with advanced noticed. A footnote in this act demonstrates the purpose of the hearing, which goes beyond only meeting a legal requirement:

The public hearing previous to the adoption of the plan or substantial part thereof has at least two values of importance. One of these is that those who are or may be dissatisfied with the plan, for economic, sentimental, or other reasons, will have the opportunity to present their objections and thus get the satisfaction of having their objections produce amendments which they desire, or at least the feeling that their objections have been given courteous and thorough consideration. The other great value of the public hearing is as an educating force; that is, it draws the public's attention to the plan, causes some members of the public to examine it, to discuss it, to hear about it, and gets publicity upon the plan and planning. Thus the plan begins its life with some public interest in it and recognition of its importance. (p. 12)

From the 1920's through the 1950's, citizen planning and zoning commissions and public hearings with advanced notice remained the main participation methods in urban planning (Goodspeed, 2008). As the urban landscape of the U.S. began to change following World War II, "urban renewal" programs, beginning with the Housing Act of 1949, demonstrated the inadequacies of these participation methods. These programs provided federal funds to cities for slum clearance, which disproportionately impacted low-income communities of color. Although public hearings were required, they did not provide meaningful space for community input in the creation or implementation of plans (Goodspeed, 2008). The Urban Renewal Act of 1954 called for the creation of advisory boards, comprised mostly of citizen participants such as bankers, developers and contractors who could make development "work". The main purpose of these boards was to implement the priorities of the agency. By

including the public in decision-making, development agencies hoped to win their cooperation (Burke, 1977; Day, 1997).

Beginning in the 1960's, the War on Poverty ushered in a new era of public participation, attempting to provide opportunities for individuals, particularly the poor, to play a larger role in decisions that affected their lives. Roberts (2004) identifies three roots of this new momentum toward inclusive planning:

- 1) The civil rights movement and its push for participatory democracy;
- 2) The strategy of those working on a National Service Corps who believed the poor should have a voice in planning and administering local programs; and;
- 3) The political force of Robert Kennedy and the young people in the Kennedy administration who championed maximum involvement of the poor. (p. 321)

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 required "maximum feasible participation of the residents of the area and members of the groups served" (Day, 1997, p. 424), coordinated through a Community Action Agency, which included community groups, local non-profits, and city agencies (Goodspeed, 2008). Although the expressed intention of this legislation was to include the poor in decision-making, little guidance was provided to local communities on ways to elicit participation, leading one critic to rename the mandate as "maximum feasible misunderstanding" (cited in Goodspeed, 2008, 17; Day, 1997). Day (1997) contends the ambiguous language led to a sort of mob rule, noting that

there was “no structural mechanism through which personal wishes were suppressed to reach a consensus” (p. 424).

Burke (1977) describes three legacies of the so-called poverty programs in terms of public participation. First, the scope of participation was legislatively widened to include “specifically identified individuals and groups” (p. 71). Second, the purpose of participation shifted. Instead of being used only as means to ensure cooperation, participation offered organizational support and provided a source of collective wisdom and information. Finally, poverty programs institutionalized public participation, evidenced by at least 72 pieces of federal legislation that mandated public participation by the mid 1970’s (Burke, 1977).

The ideals of participation continued to evolve with the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966, commonly referred to as “Model Cities”, which replaced the ambiguous language of “maximum feasible participation” with an emphasis on widespread participation. Alongside this shift, the purpose of participation changed from power sharing between citizen groups and public agencies to improved communication. The responsibility for ensuring participation resided with local government officials (Day, 1997).

Day (1997) documents an important additional change in the way participation was viewed in the 1960’s and 1970’s. For the most part, federal programs that required public participation were concentrated on social welfare, housing, civil rights and education. Government officials and planning experts dealt with the more technical, complicated decisions, such as air quality and the management of nuclear waste. However, the emergence of citizen advocacy



groups and a more environmentally conscious public challenged the authority of bureaucrats to appropriately deal with these complex issues (Day, 1997).

### **Critiques of Early Participation Efforts**

The largely unsuccessful early efforts to engage the public in urban planning prompted strong critiques, which reshaped the way some planners and civil society participants viewed the formation of the city. Sandercock (2005) identifies three interconnected reactions by civil society to the failure of early urban planning efforts to include the public in decisions that shaped the city: a crisis of representative democracy, a critique of expert knowledge and a concern for social justice. In this section, I will explore these three responses to early participation efforts in an attempt to identify elements of meaningful participation, which will inform the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of SpeakUpAustin in chapter seven.

#### **Crisis of Representative Democracy**

The pursuit of citizen participation in planning is too frequently undertaken in considerable ignorance of the political philosophy of democracy. It is apparent from case studies that most planning agencies engage in practices of citizen participation as if they were simply additional planning techniques to be woven into the planning process. Little thought, if any, is given to the considerable complexities of democracy, its theory and practice, or issues of representation. Many of the traumas generated within participation practices may be traced to naive conceptions of democracy. Inadequate understanding of theory has contributed to the less than desirable or expected performance of citizen participation. (Fagence, 1977, p. 9)

Underlying the ongoing debates about the purpose and methods of participation in urban planning are larger questions about the efficacy of the American democracy. In this section, I briefly consider theories of democracy and

citizenship – and the role these theories play in shaping how the public participates in urban planning efforts. I use the term “citizen” purposefully, emphasizing the relationship of the individual to the state.

As Roberts (2004) notes, questions about the appropriate role for citizens in a democracy are closely linked to debates about representative vs. direct democracy. Supporters of representative democracy argue that citizens do not have the time or expertise to fully engage in the complexities of state administration. In this view, the role of the citizen is to elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf. Voting provides accountability for decision makers – if they make decisions that citizens do not like, they can be voted out of office. Critics argue that representative democracy is vulnerable to disparate influence by those with money, and that it encourages passive citizenship (Roberts, 2004).

Direct democracy require citizens to be actively engaged in public decision-making, rather than electing representatives to make decisions on their behalf. Encouraging deliberation, direct forms of democracy force citizens to wrestle with complex issues, to consider the full range of opinions on any given issue and to make decisions based on consensus. Ideally, citizens are sharing power with public officials in a process of collaborative problem solving. Proponents of deliberative democracy believe it provides legitimation for public decisions. When citizens are actively engaged in public decision-making, they, in a sense, agree to the rules of the game, providing stability to government structures. Also, since all citizens have an opportunity to be involved in decisions

that affect their lives, there is a decreased risk that powerful groups will unduly influence the process (Roberts, 2004).

Similarly, Farina, Newhart & Heidt (2012) distinguish between electoral democracy and “rulemaking” – the process of policy formation through deliberative means. They argue that the goal in electoral democracy is to get as many people to participate as possible, regardless of the reasons for participation. “Voters are asked for outcomes, not reasons” (p. 9). In contrast, the participation required for policy formation requires some type of “situated knowledge” – that is, ideas about how the policy will affect the lives of those participating (Farina, Newhart & Heidt, 2012).

Although promoting an active citizenry seems desirable, the concept of direct democracy raises several concerns. First, as in representative democracy, there is a risk that powerful interest groups will dominate, at the expense of less powerful groups. The deliberative processes of direct democracy often require a lengthy time commitment, which may not be feasible for certain groups of people. Also, dealing with complex public decisions may require a certain level of technical expertise, which some citizens may not have (Roberts, 2004).

The history of urban planning demonstrates the inadequacies of representative participation (King, Feltey & Susel, 1998). Planners should embrace active engagement by a broad, diverse citizenry, encouraging deliberation among citizens to discover local knowledge, consider alternatives and reach agreement, when possible. Well-designed participation processes not only provide legitimacy for plans, but also help to shape “privately oriented

individuals into publicly oriented citizens” (Dahlberg, 2000, p. 623). To do this, planners need to ensure that citizens have access to adequate information and skills, that they are able to participate in ways that are convenient for them and that they have opportunities in the participation process to engage in dialogue with different perspectives.

### **Critique of Expert Knowledge**

Planning no longer is the exclusive domain of technical experts. The task facing planners today is that of determining who should be involved, how they should be involved, what function citizens should serve, and how to adapt a planning method to a process involving a wide range of interests and groups. The planner has become both technical expert and organizer. (Burke, 1979, p.10)

In 1961, Jane Jacobs wrote her classic book, “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”, which sharply criticized the institution of planning as out of touch with the reality of most urban environments, joining other theorists, such as John Friedmann, in questioning planning as a “modernist project” (Beauregard 1989, p. 381) based on a “comprehensive, rational model of problem solving and decision making to guide state intervention” (p. 383). The modernist approach to planning assumed the planner could maintain an objective, apolitical role within the state and could mediate between capital and labor. The failures of planning interventions such as urban renewal, particularly planning’s inability to protect the interests of marginalized stakeholders in the face of larger structural forces, raised questions about the efficacy of planning as a modernist project (Beauregard, 1989).

The response to expert-driven, top-down planning, exemplified by urban renewal programs, has been what Patsy Healey (1996) has called the “communicative turn” in planning. Healey (1996) contends that instrumental rationality – a mode of problem solving focused on the most efficient and cost effective means to a specific end - that dominated the field of planning at least through the 1960’s was too concerned with “material conditions, and on who should get what, not on how people come to understand and value the qualities of their environments” (p. 219).

Healey and other communicative theorists rely heavily on the work of Jurgen Habermas (1989) and his concepts of ideal speech and the extension of the public sphere, in advocating for “communicative rationality”. As Healey describes, Habermas argues that “we are not autonomous subjects competitively pursuing our individual preferences” but rather “our ideas about ourselves, our interests, and our values are socially constructed through our communication with others and the collaborative work this entails” (p. 239). Instead of assuming the planner is able to determine the public interest through a scientific understanding of how society is organized, the role of the planner is to facilitate a collaborative process through which people can create meaning, identify problems and work toward solutions. The task for planners, then, is to create space, Habermas’s public sphere, where participants can listen to each other and form an agreement from different viewpoints (Healey, 1996; Beauregard, 1989).

To create the framework of this collaborative space, communicative theorists utilize Habermas's principles of communicative action – the ways in which we interact with each other – that are embedded within a structure of speech. This normative structure allows us to understand what others mean when they say something. Habermas identified four rules of speech: comprehensibility, sincerity, legitimacy and truth (cited in Healey, p. 239). As Forrester (1980) explains we try expect others to...

1. Speak comprehensively; if we did not ordinarily expect this norm to be in effect, we'd expect babble and never listen.
2. Speak sincerely; if we did not presuppose this norm generally, we'd never trust anyone we listen to.
3. Speak legitimately, that is, in context.
4. Speak the truth; if we did not generally presuppose this norm, we'd never believe anything we heard. (p. 278)

Elaborating on these rules of speech, Dahlberg (2001) identified six criteria for evaluating political discourse:

- *Exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims.* Deliberation involves engaging in reciprocal critique of normative positions that are provided with reasons rather than simply asserted.
- *Reflexivity.* Participants must critically examine their cultural values, assumptions and interests, as well as the larger social context.
- *Ideal role taking.* Participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other's perspective. This requires a commitment to an ongoing dialogue with difference in which interlocutors respectfully listen to each other.
- *Sincerity.* Each participant must make a sincere effort to provide all information relevant to the particular problem under consideration, including information regarding intentions, interests, needs, and desires.
- *Discursive inclusion and equality.* Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever. Inclusion can be limited by inequalities from outside of discourse - by formal or informal restrictions to access. It can also be limited by inequalities within discourse, where some dominate discourse and others struggle to get their voices heard.

- *Autonomy from state and economic power.* Discourse must be driven by the concerns of publicly-oriented citizens rather than by money or administrative power. (p. 623)

Innes and Booher (2010), in their theory of “collaborative rationality”, add two critical components to Habermas’s speech components: 1) “diversity of actors to ensure a broad range of representation” and 2) “interdependence among the actors requiring that they all need something from one another”.

Forester adds two additional elements: the connection to political motivation (cited in Hillier, 2005) and the need for planners to be emotionally sensitive to participants in the planning process (Forester, 1996). Planners must not only facilitate a collaborative process of practical reasoning, but they must also navigate political systems to ensure that the collaborative process impacts the planning outcome. As Forester notes, “the distance between rational public policy and political will can be substantial” (cited in Hillier, 2005, pg. 164). In addition, Forester urges planners to acknowledge the emotions and passion of participants, and to listen to their stories, which may or may not be rational (Forester, 1996).

Critics of communicative rationality question the ability of this framework to deal with power disparities and challenge the goal of reaching agreement among planning participants, recognizing the positive role conflict can play in addressing urban problems. I will further explore these ideas in the next section.

The response to “expert” driven planning processes provides several lessons to planners looking for alternative models of practice. First, many planning problems are best solved collaboratively through a process of

interaction and deliberation. The communicative acts in this process are important. Planners and participants need to provide reasons for their preferences, listen to each other, reflect on their own assumptions and be open to changing viewpoints. In addition, the participation process needs to acknowledge the stories and passions of all participants. Finally, and perhaps most critically, the process of participation must be directly connected to the political process and must have some effect on planning outcomes.

### **Concern for Social Justice**

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. (Harvey, 2008, p. 23)

The third response to the early failures of public participation, identified by Sandercock (2005), was a heightened concern for the role of urban planning in pursuing social justice. In 1969, Sherry Arnstein, a former U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) official, wrote an often-cited critique of citizen participation in urban planning – “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” (Figure 2). Arnstein used an analogy of rungs on a ladder to describe three levels of citizen



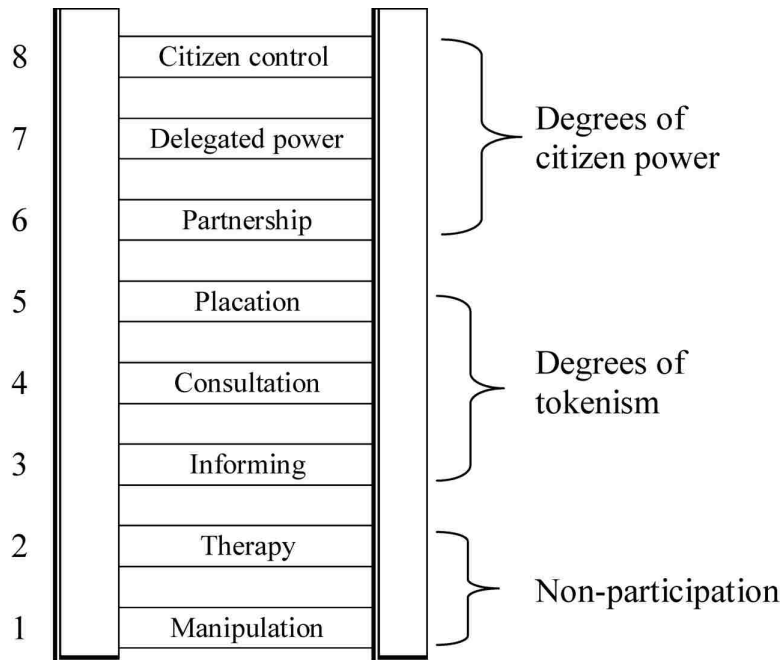


Figure 2: Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969)

participation – nonparticipation (manipulation and therapy), tokenism (informing, consultation, placation) and citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). Arnstein claimed citizen power, particularly for those typically excluded from urban decision making processes, to be the ultimate goal of participation methods and contended that no Model City program was capable of meeting that goal (Arnstein, 1969; Goodspeed, 2008). Sharing a similar concern for those marginalized in previous planning efforts, advocacy planners sought a new role for planners in promoting the goals of excluded communities (Davidoff, 1965).

David Harvey (2008) frames the concept of urban social justice in the language of human rights, an idea first proposed by Lefebvre (1992). He contends that urbanization is a class phenomenon, directly connected to the need for capitalism to invest and circulate a surplus product. Following World

War II, massive government investments in infrastructure, suburbanization and the development of the highway system provided for the absorption of surplus capital, benefiting a small group of economic and political elites while rupturing the social fabric of many low-income urban communities. Harvey argues that cities have become commodities, where value as a product far outweighs value as a place. To counter the effects of capitalism in shaping the urban environment, Harvey (2008) calls for “greater democratic control over the production and use of surplus capital” (p. 37). For Harvey, the right to the city embodies a right for the dispossessed to have a greater voice in the struggle to shape the city.

Similarly, Manuel Castells, a sociologist, in articulating a theory of urban social movements, describes the city as a “social product, resulting from conflicting social interests and values” (1983, p. 291). Cities are not naturally occurring phenomena; they are constructed by human beings to serve human purposes. As Castells describes, the dominant class defines urban spatial forms, and even the meaning of the city. Cities have been organized to maximize profits (in terms of capital) and power (in terms of politics) in order to better serve the dominant class. Similar to Harvey’s critiques of the impact of industrialization on the city, Castells describes the effects of the Information Age on the role and shape of cities. The widespread use of communication technology, along with globalization and advances in transportation technology, has again changed the value of places. Castells explains how technology is transforming “spatial places into flows and channels – what amounts to production and consumption without

any localized form” (1983, p. 312). Technology allows for production and consumption to happen in different places, along with the separation of management and work. Castells argues that these technologies are changing the meaning of places for people. Urban social movements arise from this conflict over values and attempt to redefine the meaning of the city. Castells states that many of these movements attempt to prioritize use value and quality of experience over exchange value and management centralization (1983).

In designing participation processes that are meaningful, planners should heed the call to promote social justice through urban planning efforts. In any participation effort, planners should consider who is participating – and who is not – and make efforts to build relationships with marginalized individuals and communities. In addition, planners should honestly acknowledge the goals of participation. Is the planning process designed to empower the public? Or is the goal to only elicit input? Recognizing that urban environments are created and changed through struggle, planners should acknowledge the legitimate role of social movements, which may happen outside of formal planning processes, in shaping the city. Finally, particularly in the face of capitalist pressures, planners should work to ensure that places are appreciated for their use value, not only for their exchange value.

## **Conclusion**

Participation in urban planning is the process through which the public engages with each other and with administrators to make decisions about the physical, natural and social conditions of the city. The early history of urban

planning in the U.S. demonstrates the inadequacies of many traditional participation methods and shows how the private exchange value of places has often trumped the public use value. In response, critics have called for better participation methods, which engender more engaged forms of democracy, which recognize the importance of local knowledge in determining the value of a place and which promote social justice through urban planning. The lessons provided by this history are key in creating meaningful participation processes.

Although the ideals of communicative rationality provide a helpful framework for evaluating the discourse that is part of any participation process, planners should also value the role of passion and storytelling as important elements of discourse. In addition, planners should acknowledge the many interests of participants and recognize that participation efforts will not always be able to reconcile these interests. Rather than engaging in a process of reaching agreement, participants may strategically choose to engage in conflict, contesting the role of the state in shaping the city.

As mentioned in this section, many democracy theorists have promoted the role of the deliberative citizen, which, along with communicative rationality, provides a framework for collaboration and engagement to address public issues. However, it is important to acknowledge the tension between these schools of thought and many urban social movements, including the right to the city. Although deliberative democracy may be helpful in addressing some public issues, it is less effective in dealing with the larger structural forces that shape the city. In their pursuit of social justice, many urban social movements attempt to

contest these structural forces. The right to the city movement, for example, objects to the role of capitalism in the commodification of places – and calls for a fundamental redistribution of power from the elites to the dispossessed (Harvey, 2009). This type of revolutionary urban transformation will not likely happen through the avenues of deliberative democracy. Planners should acknowledge this tension and understand that individuals and organizations involved in this struggle may choose to engage in other forms of participation – protesting, boycotting, contesting – rather than engaging in the collaborative processes of deliberative democracy and communicative action planning.

## **Chapter Four: Role of Communication Technology in Urban Planning**

As planners and planning agencies have attempted to respond to the critics of early participation methods described in the previous chapter, many have turned to communication technology in order to share information, engage in dialogue with the public and improve the transparency of decisions made about the city. It is important to note that online forms of communication are most successful when they complement, not replace, face-to-face forms of participation (Leighninger, n.d.).

In this chapter, I demonstrate that communication technology through the medium of the Internet has experienced a similar trajectory to public participation in urban planning – moving from strictly controlled, expert created websites to user-created, dynamic forums. In briefly describing the evolution of the Internet as a communication tool, I identify ways this tool can address the three main responses to early participation methods in urban planning: crisis of representative democracy, critique of expert knowledge and concern for social justice.

### **Evolution of Communication Technology**

In the early 1960's, the U.S. Department of Defense developed the technology that would later result in the creation of the Internet (Leiner et al., 1997). The widespread use of the Internet came several decades later in the 1990's when websites, with information controlled by the site owners, and email

communication became the norm (Farina, Newhart & Heidt, 2012). This early iteration of the Internet relied on static, one-way communication between individuals or groups of people. In the context of planning, citizens could email city councilors, join neighborhood email groups and access information through municipal websites. Although this use of technology increased access to information and made some types of participation more convenient, it did not fundamentally transform the role of the public in urban planning initiatives (Chadwick, 2008).

Fortunately, for planners and others interested in improving public participation, the structure of the Internet has changed. The Internet has evolved from static, one-way communication to platforms that “share a dedication to simplicity, usability and interactivity”, in what is commonly referred to as Web 2.0 (Goodspeed, 2008; Chadwick, 2008). These websites – exemplified by Facebook, YouTube and Twitter - encourage users to co-create information, provide convenient access to large amounts of data and allow users to easily share content across multiple networks (Goodspeed, 2008). Castells (2007) describes the transformation of society through the Internet as the “rise of the network society”, which has greatly increased horizontal connections between users. Farina, Newhart & Heidt (2012) contend that “the ethos of Web 2.0 is highly inclusive” (p. 4), having an “architecture of participation” (cited in Farina, Newhart & Heidt, p. 5).

Based on the conceptual work of Tim O’Reilly, an early pioneer of Web 2.0, Chadwick (2008) describes several Web 2.0 principles that have implications

for e-democracy and online public participation. The first principle is that the movement away from static web pages creates opportunities for users to manage content and provides space for political discussion (and other types of discussions) in ways that were not previously possible. Second, Web 2.0 recognizes the collective intelligence of ordinary citizens – commonly referred to as “crowdsourcing” - providing users with simple, adaptable tools to produce information that may be more useful than that produced by centralized “experts”. Third, Web 2.0 promotes experimentation and adaptation of web pages as users engage with them and change them according to their needs. This is a movement away from tightly controlled web pages to more fluid pages designed through collaboration between users and web developers. Finally, Web 2.0 relies on the ability to capture useful aggregated information from seemingly small, individual actions that then contributes to shaping the content of the web pages. For example, the popular website, Reddit, allows a user to “vote up” content provided by other users. The content that receives the most votes appears at the top of the web page (Chadwick, 2008; Reddit).

The evolution of the Internet from expert-driven to user-created content has implications for the democratization of planning, the inclusion of local knowledge in participation processes and the pursuit of social justice through urban planning. In the next part of this chapter, I provide a brief description of these implications.



## **The Internet and Democracy**

As stated earlier, much has been written about the potential of the Internet to improve democracy in the U.S. – opening up the process to more participants, making participation more convenient, providing easier access to information and creating forums for citizens to interact with each other and with administrators (Dahlberg, 2000).

Coleman and Moss (2011) categorize four of the most common types of online citizen roles identified in literature on the relationship between the Internet and democracy. First, the “realistic model of citizenship” assumes that citizens do not have the time or capacity to do more than observe politics from a distance and occasionally vote. In this version of citizenship, the Internet is used to provide easy access to a broad range of government information and services – but does little more than that. This model “seems to assume that democratic norms can be realized while most citizens are busy getting on with their own lives, oblivious to the public sphere” (Coleman and Moss, 2011, p. 2).

The second model of citizenship described by Coleman and Moss (2011) is that of a consumer in a “marketplace of ideas”. Individual citizens seek to maximize personal gain, while minimizing risk and civic responsibility. Individuals and interest groups use the Internet to compete over “information needs and social advantages at the expense of others” (p. 3). Political advocacy via the Internet – through mass appeals, lobbying and strategic campaigns – pushes some items to the top of the political agenda, while marginalizing others. The

goal is to “to provide individual citizens with enough information to help them pursue their day-to-day personal interests” (p. 3).

The third model of citizenship is that of the participatory citizen, which has been an ideal since the cultural revolution of the 1960’s. The participatory citizen is aware of and engaged in political processes – from neighborhood associations to volunteering on local projects. Governments encourage citizens to “get involved” and provide a variety of ways of doing so. Communication technology allows citizens to provide input on policies, read blogs of their local representative and email city councilors. However, Coleman and Moss rightly acknowledge that the rules of engagement – along with what is considered to be “appropriate” types of participation – are defined by the ruling elite, not by ordinary citizens. The ideal of the participatory citizen has remained largely an ideal, in part because governments have been the ones deciding when citizens should participate and how their participation will influence the decision making process (Coleman & Moss, 2011).

The limited success of participatory citizenship has caused a renewed interest in the fourth role identified by Coleman & Moss (2011), the deliberative citizen. Citizens in this role engage with each other and with decision makers to debate and discuss issues and policy proposals on their merits rather than on pre-conceived ideologies or through power grabs. The Internet provides a forum for thoughtful reflection, listening to opposing viewpoints and creating new knowledge. Although the concept of the deliberative citizen is prolific in the digital democracy literature, a precise definition of deliberation has remained elusive,

making it difficult to recognize deliberation when it occurs (Coleman & Moss, 2011).

Attempting to evaluate the actual discourse of the deliberative citizen, Dahlberg (2000) and Freelon (2011) build on the conceptual work of Habermas (1989) to provide a framework for analyzing online political conversations. Dahlberg describes three overlapping models of democracy that are evident in online discussions: liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative. These models share similarities with the online citizen roles described by Coleman and Moss (2012) but focus on how individuals engage with each other in political discussions. Freelon (2011) identifies indicative metrics for each of Dahlberg's models of democracy.

Models of democratic communication	Indicative metrics	Description
Liberal individualist	Monologue	Stating opinion without demonstrating a willingness to listen and reflect
	Personal revelation	Disclosure of personal information
	Personal showcase	Using online forums to promote self-created content
Communitarian	Flaming	Using insults to attack another person or an organization
	Ideological fragmentation	Communicating only to individuals and organizations that are part of your identity group
	Mobilization	Advocating for political action

	Community identification	Using communal language (“we”, “us”, “our”) to promote communal identity
	Intra-ideological response	Conversational response to those of a similar ideology
	Intra-ideological questioning	Asking questions of those of a similar ideology
Deliberative	Rational-critical argument	Making logical appeals to the common good in support of one’s position
	Public issue focus	Discussions primarily focus on subjects considered to be political
	Equality	Posts are evenly distributed among participants
	Discussion topic focus	Discussions remain focused on the original topic
	Inter-ideological response	Conversation response to those of a different ideology
	Inter-ideological questions	Asking questions of those of a different ideology

**Table 1: Indicative Metrics for Democratic Communication (Freelon, 2011)**

Liberal individualist online spaces emphasize individual interests and provide a platform for individual expression (Dahlberg, 2001; Freelon, 2011). Individuals are able to view the opinions of others “to see where they stand on

issues and, if necessary, rebut them” (Freelon, 2011). The flow of communication is primarily one way and is characterized by monologue, personal showcase, personal revelation and flaming. It should be noted that there is some disagreement in the literature regarding the utility of disclosing personal information as part of a reasoned argument. Freelon (2011) includes personal revelation as a metric for liberal individualist communication because it embodies the tendency for liberal individualists to focus on themselves.

The communitarian model of democracy in online spaces is concerned with reinforcing existing community ties and establishing new ones. The goal of these spaces is the formation of a group identity and cohesion, not a platform for individual expression. Communitarian communication is characterized by ideological fragmentation, mobilization and community identification. Although these spaces may promote more two-way communication than liberal individualist spaces, this communication is within a homogenously bounded population (Freelon, 2011)

The third model of democracy identified by Dahlberg (2001) in online communication is the deliberative model.

Dahlberg (2001) explains:

In free and open dialogue, participants put forward and challenge claims and arguments about common problems, not resting until satisfied that the best reasons have been given and fully defended. Participants attempt to come to an understanding of their interlocutors and to reflexively modify their pre-discursive positions in response to better arguments. In the process, private individuals become public-oriented citizens. (p. 167)

Communication in deliberative democratic spaces is characterized by rational critical argument, public issue focus, equality, discussion topic focus, inter ideological questioning and inter ideological reciprocity (Freelon, 2011).

The Internet provides a convenient platform for participants to engage in discussions about public issues. However, deliberative discourse, as described in this section, does not happen naturally. Moderators of online discussions can help participants frame their contributions in ways that encourage listening, respect and reflection (Coleman & Moss, 2011).

Although the concepts of deliberative democracy and communicative rationality exemplified by Dahlberg (2001) and Habermas (1989) have dominated evaluation of online political discourse, critics of this evaluation methodology have argued that it places too high of a value on certain types of participation and discourse – those that meet the strict requirements of deliberation - while marginalizing others. Public participation is a social construct; often those doing the research are the ones deciding which types of participation are preferred. Researchers have often defined the participant as a deliberative citizen as the ideal type of participation. Other types – protesting, boycotting, storytelling – are given less prominence in the literature on participation, although these activities may be strategic forms of participation for some groups. In addition, deliberative ideals of citizenship may privilege “gendered and ethnocentric” forms of framing an argument, marginalizing those voices that do not meet the rigorous requirements of deliberators (Coleman & Moss, 2012).

In addition, there is an implied assumption in much of the literature on deliberative democracy that a single common good exists and that a process of deliberation will inevitably lead to the discovery of that common good. This assumption is highly contested by critics of deliberative democracy (Mouffe, 2005).

### **The Internet and Local Knowledge**

As urban planning moves away from a focus on top-down expertise to collaborative problem solving, the role for planners becomes creating spaces that promote the exchange of ideas, listening, reflecting and reaching an agreement. The Internet provides the capacity to reach large, diverse groups of people, potentially enabling access to new ideas and the creation of new knowledge. Brabham (2009) argues for urban planning to embrace the concept of “crowdsourcing”, which has been successfully used to design software and business products, as a way of solving urban problems.

“Crowdsourcing” provides a way of leveraging collective intelligence – “a form of universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills” (cited in Brabham, 2009, p. 247). Generally, crowdsourcing involves framing a problem, posing that problem to a large group of people through the medium of the Internet and then allowing people to offer solutions to the problem. Most crowd-sourcing models rely on users to filter out the best solutions through voting, commenting to improve the proposed solutions and posing questions to further clarify the solution.

Most urban planning initiatives focus on some type of problem related to the urban environment. The concept of crowdsourcing is not radically different than what already happens in planning related workshops and community meetings. However, the Internet provides a platform for interaction that is difficult to replicate in face-to-face meetings. Using the Internet, planners are easily able to pose problems to a large group of participants in different physical locations. Participants can respond at times that are convenient for them, and since conversations can be asynchronous, the Internet provides the space for an ongoing dialogue, with participants responding to ideas that were posted at a different point in time. Webpages can store large amounts of information, providing a record of the progression and evolution of ideas. Finally, the Internet allows participants to include images, videos and links to relevant information as part of the problem-solving conversation (Brabham, 2009).

Crowdsourcing relies in part on small, aggregated activities of users- i.e. voting for an idea or posting a short comment in support of, or opposition to, an idea. Although these activities do not meet the requirements of deliberation, discussed in the previous section, Chadwick (2009) urges researchers to consider these “low threshold” forms of participation a legitimate means of engagement. In addition to analyzing political discourse, researchers need to find ways to value how many citizens actually interact online – which is often through low threshold participation such as “liking” an idea or writing a short comment without engaging in a more sustained debate with other users. Effective online engagement provides a variety of opportunities for citizens to be involved, from



low-threshold, low risk options to more demanding, higher risk options (Chadwick 2009).

### **The Internet and Social Justice**

In this section, I address two implications for the use of the Internet in urban planning related to the pursuit of social justice. First, although the Internet is changing many people's communication patterns and preferences, the digital divide continues to impact who has access to communication technology and who does not (Leighninger, 2011). Second, communication technology, as a platform for horizontal communication, provides new means of resistance to the control of cities by the dominant class (Castells, 2007).

Increasingly, government entities are turning to the Internet to "support government operations, engage citizens and provide government services" (Goodspeed, 2008 p. 4). If, as argued in this thesis, the pursuit of social justice is an integral part of urban planning, planners must pay careful attention to the effects of reliance on communication technology for public participation on already marginalized communities. Although the dynamics of the digital divide are changing rapidly, many low-income communities and individuals lack access to the technology and capacity to effectively engage online. At the same time, poor communities are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use of online tools (Leighninger, 2011). Planners must find ways to ensure that these communities either have access to the appropriate technology or have other opportunities for engagement. At the same time, planners should not assume that marginalized communities are not engaging online because of a lack of

access to technology and capacity. These communities may be strategically refusing to engage with tools that they do not feel will benefit them.

In the previous chapter, I described the role of urban social movements in challenging the control of places by the dominant class, who dominate primarily through controlling the investment of surplus capital. Castells (2007) argues that the proliferation of communication technology through the network society into all aspects of social life has resulted in a shift in power relations. Increasingly, power is shaped in the communication space, with elites attempting to control the flow of information, often through the apparatus of the state. Just as the physical environment, i.e. the city, is shaped through a process of conflict over interests and values, virtual space is also shaped by these conflicts. At the same time, increased horizontal communication, made possible by communication technology, also fosters space for resistance of power accumulation by dominant classes – and for the effects this accumulation has on the value of places. Castells documents how social movements have embraced communication technology – “the space of flows” – while maintaining a connection to the space of places (2007).

### **Conclusion**

The development of Web 2.0 platforms has exponentially increased opportunities for urban planners to engage citizens. Participation and co-creation are fundamental principles of these new technologies. Planners can quickly post an image of a proposed street redesign for feedback on Facebook, pose a question about a new comprehensive plan on Twitter and share a video of a

community planning meeting on YouTube. Residents, who have access to the Internet, are able to engage with each other and with City officials at times that are convenient for them, can provide input to a proposed plan without attending a public meeting and can easily access a plethora of background information on proposed plans.

Communication technology can provide a platform for public deliberation and allow large groups of participants to collectively brainstorm solutions to urban problems. At the same time, these technologies provide new challenges to urban planners. As government entities increasingly rely on communication through the Internet, it is critical that all stakeholders have equal access to these forums. Finally, as the Internet changes the role and shape of cities, planners need to recognize the legitimate use of communication technology to contest decisions made about the city.

## **Chapter 5: Meaningful Participation Criteria**

In this chapter, I review four major obstacles to participation that have been implied in the previous sections and briefly discuss the implications of online participation methods for these obstacles. I then outline criteria for meaningful participation, gleaned from the history of participation practice and theory as well as more recent literature on the role of communication technology in urban planning.

### **Obstacles to Meaningful Citizen Participation**

The history of participation in urban planning – and the responses to the failures of planning efforts – highlights a number of obstacles to meaningful public participation. The use of communication technology holds the potential to overcome several of these obstacles, while also introducing new ones that must be considered by urban planners interested in designing meaningful citizen participation processes.

#### **Time**

Planning processes – particularly those addressing controversial issues - take place over periods of months, sometimes years (Goodspeed, 2008). In order to be involved in the process, participants often need to attend public meetings. As Roberts (2004) notes, contemporary life in the U.S. is filled with demands on time. Many people, particularly those in lower income brackets, work several jobs; have family responsibilities and other commitments that preclude them from attending face-to-face meetings. Communication technology

can ease the burden of time constraints by allowing individuals to participate at times that are most convenient for them.

### **Administrative Practice**

Yang and Pandey (2011) identify bureaucratic red tape as a major barrier to effective public participation. The complexity of municipal decision-making processes can be difficult for ordinary citizens to understand and to penetrate. In addition, bureaucrats may be reluctant to change traditional decision-making processes to include public input.

Although many government entities have integrated communication technology into their structures, there remains a marked reluctance to fully embrace these new techniques, creating high expectations for users that are often not met (Chadwick, 2009).

### **Access**

Since the public meeting remains the conventional method of participation in most planning efforts, those wishing to be involved in planning must have access to these meetings. This means the meetings must be scheduled at times that are convenient for most potential participants – and participants typically must have access to a form of transportation that will allow them to attend the meeting.

The introduction of communication technology changes the nature of this obstacle. Instead of needing access to physical meetings and to transportation, potential participants must have access to the Internet. Although the nature of the digital divide is changing rapidly, urban planners must consider the potential of

marginalizing certain parts of the population by offering online opportunities for participation (Leighninger, 2011).

### **Capacity**

Citizens often find it difficult to compete with experts when discussing planning initiatives. Experts tend to have access to more information, understand the complexity of planning language and know how to maneuver the decision-making process.

Communication technology can provide greater access to information and make decision-making processes more transparent. At the same time, these technologies require a different type of user capacity. Users must have the skills needed to use the technology. In addition, planners need to recognize and value the local expertise of participants.

Communication technology both addresses several obstacles to meaningful participation and introduces new ones. Planners must consider issues related to access and capacity, in particular, when introducing technology into the participation process. Leighninger (n.d.) suggests that the most effective participation strategies include both face-to-face meetings and communication technology.

### **Meaningful Participation Criteria**

Considering the critiques of early public participation methods – particularly related to the crisis of representative democracy, the criticism of expert knowledge and the concern for social justice – I argue that urban planners need to assume new roles and utilize new tools to provide space for meaningful

online participation. What does meaningful online participation that engages the public in decision-making, that recognizes local expertise and that pursues social justice look like?

Before identifying criteria for meaningful participation that addresses these questions and responds to the obstacles outlined in the previous section, I will briefly describe several underlying principles that guide these criteria. First, I believe the tenets of deliberative discourse are helpful in analyzing the political conversation that is part of any participation process. In my view, conversations that meet the requirements of deliberation are preferred over those that do not. However, I think it is important to recognize that these types of conversations may not be effective for all individuals or groups in a planning process. As described in previous sections, cities are shaped by struggles over values and resources; therefore, those who are not part of the dominant class may choose more agonistic strategies of participation. In evaluating the participation opportunities afforded through SpeakUpAustin, I attempt to identify when it appears that participants are contesting the role of the state or the goals of a particular initiative. Second, in applying the criteria described below to the discourse on SpeakUpAustin, I rely on the indicative metrics identified by Freelon (2011) (Table 1, p. 44-45). However, I also attempt to heed Forester's (1996) call to recognize the role of passion and storytelling in participation processes.

Related to this, I believe it is important to acknowledge that other venues, outside of institutionalized participation structures, exist for conversations about urban issues. Urban planners should recognize that some groups of people may

feel more comfortable engaging in forums that are not connected to formal planning structures. Also, just as the users of the city have the right to participate in its physical development, I believe that users of public virtual spaces have a right to determine how that space is structured. Finally, I agree with Chadwick (2009) that researchers of online participation methods should value low threshold forms of participation.

The criteria for meaningful online participation, articulated in the forms of questions, considers four aspects of public participation: the characteristics of participants, the discourse of the participation, the types of participation opportunities and the impact of participation on outcomes of the planning process. These criteria attempt to address both the experiences of those who are participating and the effects of participation on planning decisions that are made by the City.

### **Characteristics of Participants**

- Is there a broad range of participants engaging in the forum?
- Does the website engage participants who are not involved in other City initiatives?
- Is the forum accessible to a broad range of Austin residents?

### **Discourse of Participation**

- Does the website promote deliberative discourse?
- Do users have enough information to participate in the discourse?
- Do users engage in dialogue with those who have expressed an opposing viewpoint?



- Is the website viewed as a safe space to express opinions?
- Is discourse driven by public concerns or by the City?

### **Participation Opportunities**

- Does the website offer low to high threshold forms of participation?
- Do participants understand the different ways they can participate through the website?
- Does the website make it easy for participants to remain engaged?
- Are users able to participate in shaping the structure of the website?

### **Participation Outcomes**

- Does participation through the website impact decisions made by the City?
- Is the City transparent about the purpose of the website and the ways that participation impacts decisions?
- Does the City show that it values the local knowledge that is expressed through the website?

### **Conclusion**

After considering the role of participation in the early history of planning in the U.S., I believe participation methods utilizing communication technology, when designed well, can provide space for meaningful participation. The criteria described in this section attempt to address the inadequacies of early participation methods and the obstacles to participation which continue to deter many members of the public from engaging in decisions that shape the city. In the next chapter, I apply these criteria to SpeakUpAustin to determine the extent

to which the participation opportunities afforded through this website are meaningful for the residents of Austin.

## Chapter Six: Case Study Findings

This section of the thesis applies the meaningful participation criteria identified in the previous chapter to the City of Austin’s public participation website, SpeakUpAustin. The goal of this section is to determine the extent to which the participation opportunities provided by SpeakUpAustin meet the requirements of meaningful participation. SpeakUpAustin is one of several venues where residents can engage with the City – others include public meetings and through neighborhood associations.



Figure 3: Instructions Posted on SpeakUpAustin

### Website Development

In September of 2010, the City of Austin partnered with an Austin-based software development company, Sentient Services, to develop SpeakUpAustin. The impetus for this site came from recognition by City staff that many of their community engagement efforts were reaching the same group of people. City staff wanted a forum where ordinary citizens could easily and conveniently

engage in “conversations that matter” about things that were important to them in Austin.

One City staff member explained,

And really the feeling was we really needed to democratize the public engagement process because the other thing I was seeing over and over and over again...You know Austin is pathologically involved, and that's a good thing. That's what you want in a community. But it's dominated by a lot of very vocal single interest groups, and it was disenfranchising a lot of folks who rightfully do and should have an opinion about what we're doing as a city. But there wasn't a pathway in for them because the traditional methodology we were using made it very difficult for them to participate either because of the time it required or because of the forum itself- it was the loudest and most researched position that won the day. And a lot of folks would kind of fall into the background and not say anything. So we need to figure out how do we really democratize this, create a safe place for people to be able to share their ideas and share their opinions and have a dialogue on their own time, on their own schedule.

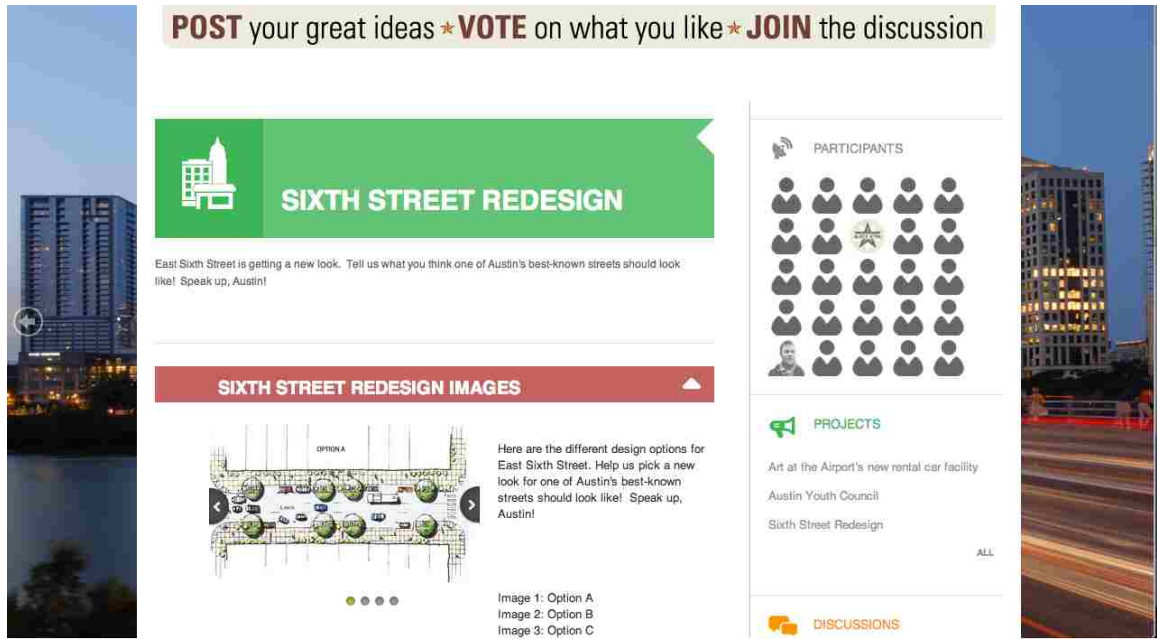
Sentient Services had been in the process of developing a platform for private sector businesses based on the concept of “social ideation”. Social ideation, similar to crowdsourcing, encourages users to post ideas about improvements that could be made to products. Other users can click on a button to “vote” for an idea, add comments to improve an idea or propose competing ideas. The sponsoring company then considers implementing the ideas with the most votes and comments.

Sentient Services was interested in developing a similar platform for public sector organizations, and the City of Austin was willing to serve as a laboratory to adapt the social ideation platform to the public sector. The development process for the website took approximately six months, and SpeakUpAustin was launched in March of 2011. The City promoted the site through a partnership with

Your News Now (YNN), the local NPR affiliate and through their Community Registry, which is a listserv of local residents who want to receive information from the City. In early 2012, Granicus, a privately owned corporation based in San Francisco, CA, purchased the licensing rights to SpeakUpAustin and is now solely responsible for the ongoing development of the website.


SpeakUpAustin is a public website that anyone with an Internet connection can access. In order to interact with the site, users must register and create a user profile – and are prompted to voluntarily answer a set of profile questions. Alternatively, users can sign up for SpeakUpAustin through their existing Facebook accounts. This requirement is designed to provide some accountability for those posting ideas and comments on the site. Although it would be possible for users to register using a fake identity, City staff were not aware of any of these types of accounts.

SpeakUpAustin provides several different citizen participation opportunities. First, City Staff post “projects” on the website to elicit specific feedback. For example, the City is currently considering options for the redesign of Sixth Street (Figure 4). In order to get feedback from Austin residents, City staff created the Sixth Street Redesign project on SpeakUpAustin. The project provides images of redesign options, allowing users to vote for the redesign that they prefer. In addition, the users can complete a survey about the redesign, join a discussion or provide their own ideas on improving Sixth Street.



**Figure 4: Example of a SpeakUpAustin project**

In addition to the project sections of the website, users can join discussions initiated by the City, typically connected to a specific project (Figure 5). These discussions range from a general conversation about bicycling in Austin to a conversation about a master plan for the Park at Festival Beach.



## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF AUSTIN'S FOOD SECTOR

110 Answers · 26 Participants · Closes in: 23 day

Austin's food sector has a **\$4.1 billion economic impact annually** and supports more than **43,000 jobs in the metro area** according to a recent report presented to the Austin City Council on March 28th. Based on a similar report conducted by the City in 2012, those numbers almost match the amount of money and jobs that all the creative sectors support combined. The report also notes that despite Austin's bounty, many of our neighbors struggle with hunger and/or health issues related to nutrition.

**TOPICS**


- Define "Local Food"
- What does "Austin food" mean to you?
- Buy Local?
- Frequent buyers?
- Health and Nutrition: Go-To Sources?
- What do you know about hunger in Austin?

The first-of-its-kind economic impact analysis on Austin's food sector looked at 20 different classes of business establishments from agriculture, food processing/manufacturing, food distribution, and retail food/eating and drinking places, to determine their impact annually on the economy. The report focuses on activities that bring new money to Austin or allows residents to be able to buy more products locally.

Some key findings highlight Austin's creative and entrepreneurial spirit present in the food scene – from locally-made products, to farms, trailers and restaurants. The report also notes that despite Austin's bounty, many of our neighbors struggle with hunger and/or health issues related to nutrition. You can read all the findings and recommendations from the Austin City Council Report at: <http://austintexas.gov/economicgrowth>

Weigh in on the important factors when discussing Austin's food sector by speaking up now!

**PARTICIPANTS**



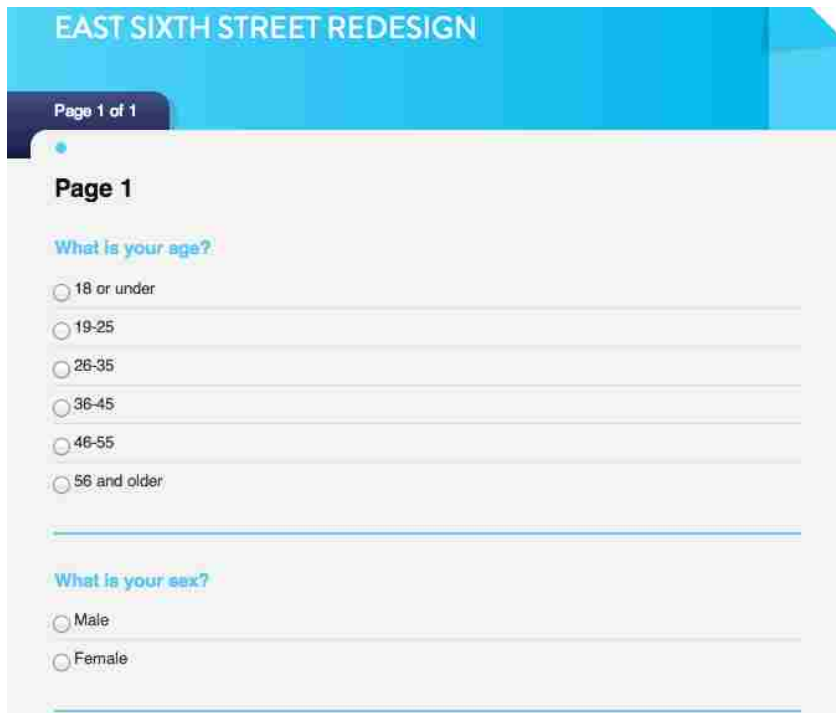
**PROJECTS**

- Seaholm Intake Facility
- Art at the Airport's new rental car facility
- Austin Youth Council
- Sixth Street Redesign

**FORUMS**

**Figure 5: Example of a SpeakUpAustin discussion**

The third way for residents to participate on SpeakUpAustin is by completing a survey that, again, is typically connected to a City project (Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Example of a SpeakUpAustin survey**

Finally, users can post their own ideas for City improvements. Users are encouraged to share these ideas with their social networks. To accomplish this, the site includes the ability to easily share information through Facebook and Twitter. Ideas that receive twenty votes or ten comments will receive an official response from the City (Figure 7).



# How can we improve the City of Austin?

Search or create a new idea...

**Latest Ideas** Highest Rated Most Comments

Filter by Idea Type

---

**2**  
Vote

## Move yard waste pickup to every two weeks

Cut fuel usage and save labor and vehicle costs by shifting yard trimmings collection to a two-week schedule. Two-week pickup works great for recycling, and most residents don't really need to have leaves and lawn clippings picked up every week all year.

by [Noah](#) 10 days ago

0   0   0

acknowledged

---

Leave a comment...

---

**10**  
Vote

## Better Petitions

The City of Austin should adopt the practices of the White House's 'We the People' petition platform ([petitions.whitehouse.gov](http://petitions.whitehouse.gov)). Specifically, the City Manager & Council Members should embrace a norm of responding in writing and video to any petition garnering over 100 votes within 30 days of being posted on [speakupaustin!](#) platform or any petition garnering over 300 votes at any time. This... [Read More](#)

Figure 7: Examples of ideas posted on SpeakUpAustin

The administration for SpeakUpAustin is coordinated through the City of Austin's Communications Department. City staff in the Communications Department monitor the website on a weekly basis and inform other offices of comments or questions that are relevant to them. Communications Department staff encourage other departments to respond to these inquiries in a timely

manner. Currently, the website boasts over 2500 registered users who have posted 642 ideas. Sixty-two of the proposed ideas have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented.

### **User Demographics**

Meaningful participation requires engagement by a broad range of participants. In order to better understand the characteristics of SpeakUpAustin users, I reviewed aggregated demographic information from those users who had completed their user profiles. Although this information provides some ideas about the diversity of participants, it should not be seen as representative of all website users. In addition, it is not possible to know the level of engagement of those users who have completed their profiles. Numerous focus group participants noted that they had signed up for the website, visited it once or twice and then did not return. Finally, several of the questions asked as part of the user profile provide helpful information but cannot be compared to the larger population of Austin since I did not have access to a survey that asks similar questions of the broader population.

## Internet Usage

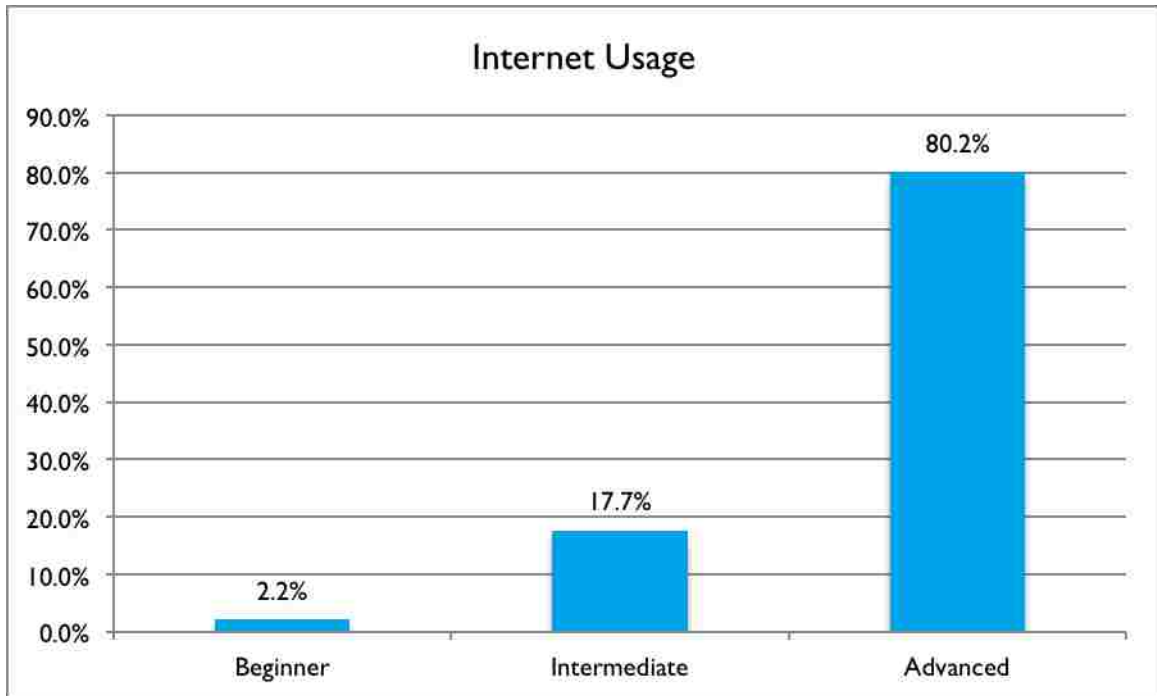
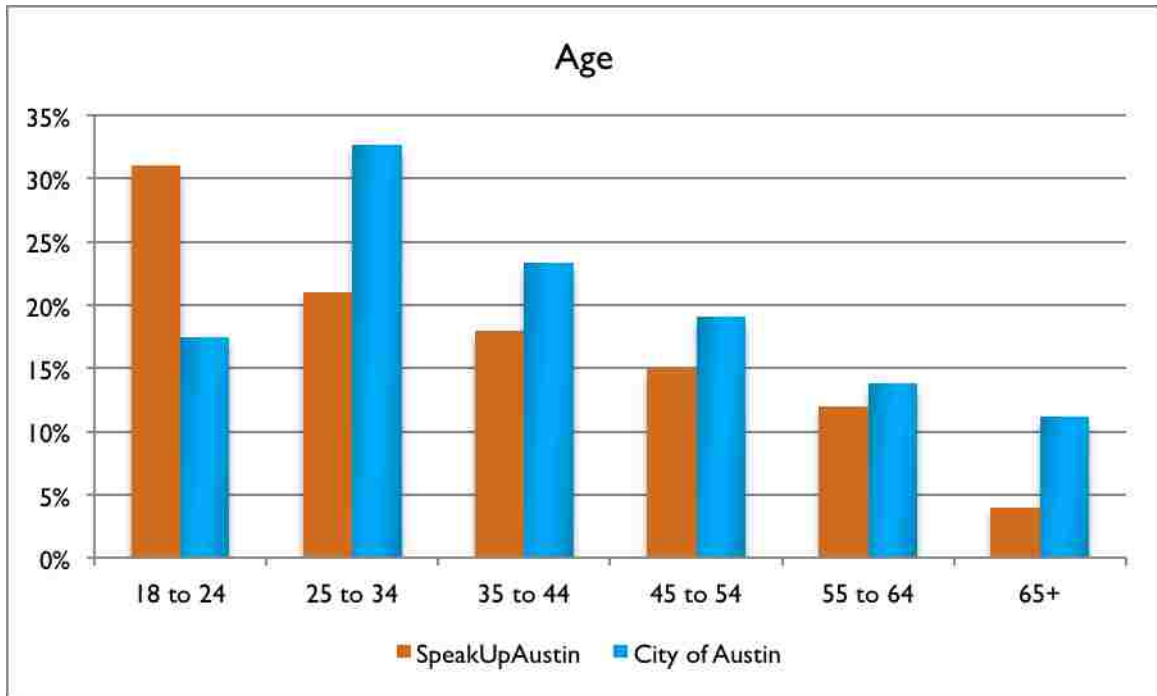


Figure 8: Internet Usage of SpeakUpAustin Users with Completed Profiles (Source: Granicus)

SpeakUpAustin participants were asked the following question: “Please choose the category that best describes your Internet level of expertise.” An overwhelming majority of registrants who completed their profiles consider themselves to be advanced Internet users. Again, it is not possible to compare this information with the level of Internet expertise of the majority of Austin residents. However, it is reasonable to assume that those who feel more comfortable using the Internet will be more likely to register for SpeakUpAustin than those who are less Internet savvy. This may create an obstacle to attracting the type of diverse participation, particularly from historically excluded communities, required for meaningful participation.

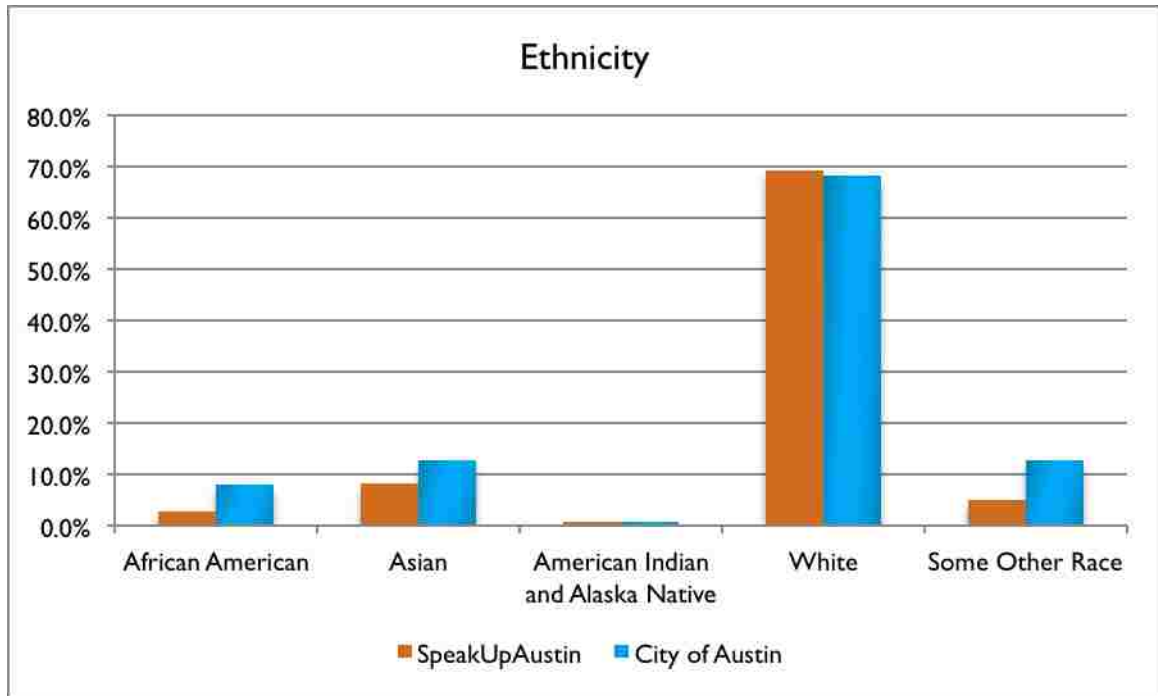
## Age



**Figure 9: Age of SpeakUpAustin Users with Completed Profiles and Austin Residents (Source: Granicus; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)**

Nearly a third of users who have completed their profiles on SpeakUpAustin are under the age of 25. This is a much larger percentage than that of the population of Austin. Percentages in other age categories decrease as age increases – similar to the larger population of Austin. Younger people, who typically are more comfortable using the Internet, may be more likely to participate in SpeakUpAustin than older populations.

## Ethnicity



**Figure 10: Ethnicity of SpeakUpAustin Users with Completed Profiles (Granicus & U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)**

When compared with the City of Austin, a smaller percentage of website registrants who completed their profiles are African American or Asian – and a slightly larger percentage identified as white. In reference to the Hispanic population, a significantly lower percentage of SpeakUpAustin users who provided this information identified as Hispanic. However, this number may be misleading since the SpeakUpAustin profile question which addresses ethnicity included Hispanic with the categories (Figure 10), whereas the U.S. Census includes a separate question asking respondents to identify as Hispanic or Non Hispanic (Figure 11).

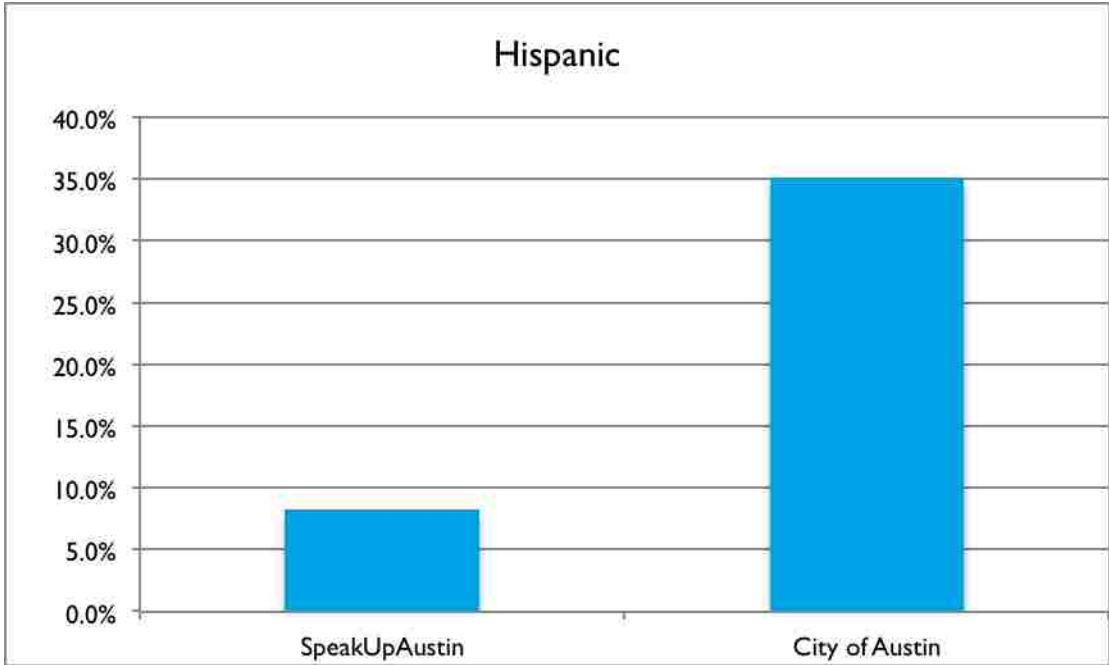


Figure 11: Hispanic SpeakUpAustin Users with Completed Profiles and Austin Residents (Source: Granicus; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

**Educational Attainment**

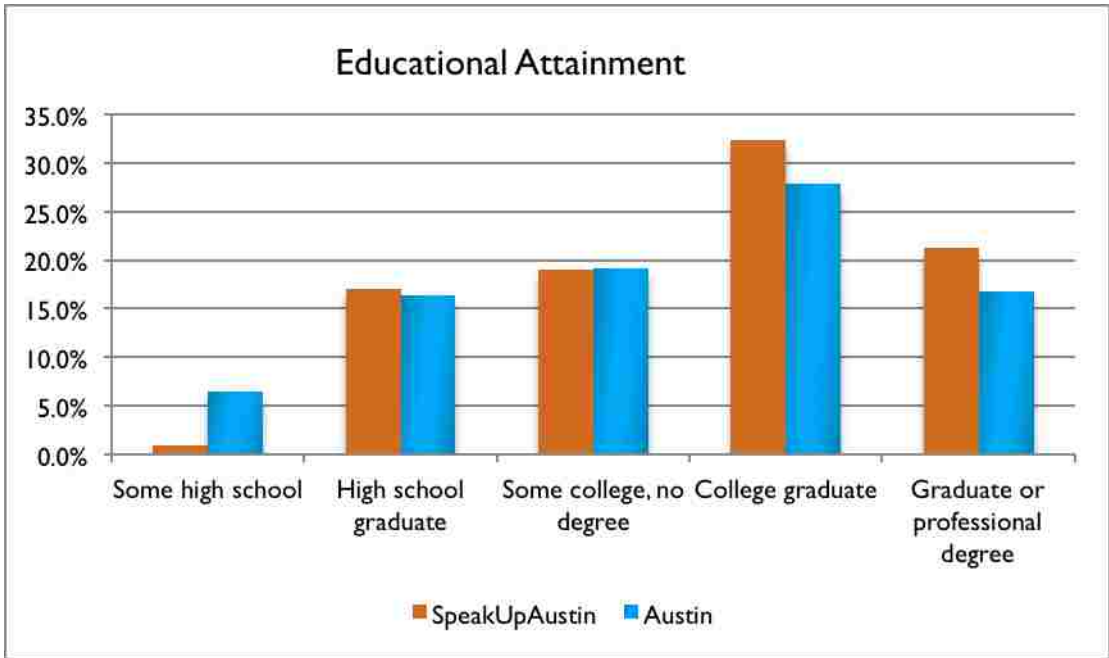


Figure 12: Educational Attainment for SpeakUpAustin Users with Completed Profiles and Austin Residents (Source: Granicus; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)

A similar percentage of SpeakUpAustin users who completed their profiles and Austin residents are high school graduates or have completed some college but have not received a degree. A higher percentage of SpeakUpAustin users are college graduates or have a graduate or professional degree.

### Involvement in Government

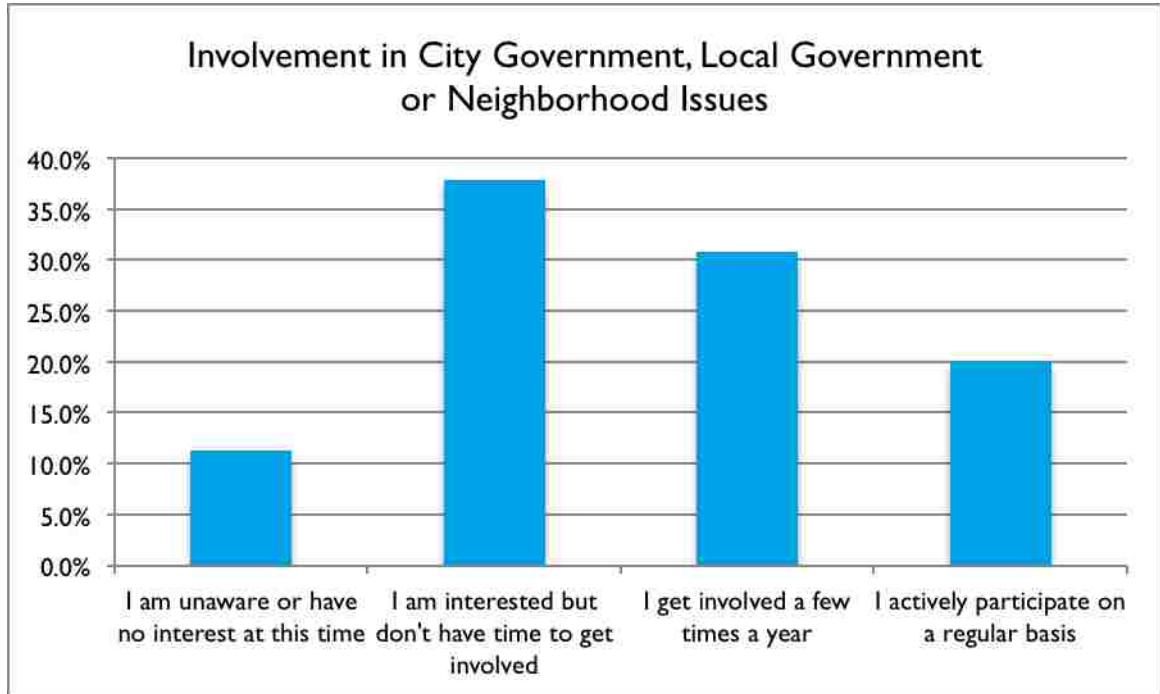


Figure 13: Involvement in Government of SpeakUpAustin Users with a Completed Profile (Source: Granicus)

One of the questions about SpeakUpAustin is whether it is reaching those who are not currently engaged or providing another platform for those who are already involved in City governance. Over 50% of SpeakUpAustin users who completed their profiles reported being involved in city or local government or neighborhood issues at least a few times a year. Although it is not possible to compare this information with the engagement levels of Austin residents, an overwhelming majority of focus group participants reported being actively

engaged in city planning activities, including attending City Council meetings, being a part of a neighborhood association and subscribing to City list serves.

### **Summary**

Although only 30% of SpeakUpAustin users have completed the online profile questions, this information provides a glimpse into the characteristics of website users. Many of those who have completed their profiles report being advanced Internet users, being younger than the general population of Austin, having attained higher education levels and are more likely to be white. These characteristics are consistent with the characteristics of focus group participants for this research.

### **Focus Group & Interview Themes**

This section of the thesis identifies common themes that were found in analyzing transcriptions of focus groups and interviews. The goal is to identify both convergent and divergent perspectives of research participants. These themes fall into the following categories: characteristics of website participants, website design, purpose of the website, promotion, access, dialogue, impact of website and transparency.

It should be noted that although these findings are particular to SpeakUpAustin, some of the concerns raised during focus groups and interviews transcend the website. As one City staff described, “The site is kind of a little petri dish for a lot of this stuff. A lot of the same systemic issues that you have in the organization manifest themselves in the online space.” In addition, it is important to state that focus group participants were overwhelmingly appreciative of the



SpeakUpAustin initiative. They viewed it as an important participation tool and, perhaps not surprisingly, had high expectations for its effectiveness. Although many of the findings discussed in this section could be seen as critiques of SpeakUpAustin or of the City, they should be viewed as an attempt to offer insights into ways of improving the website.

### **Characteristics of website participants**

Focus group participants ranged in age from recent college graduates to those in retirement. They live in different parts of the City, including downtown, North Austin, West Austin, East Austin, Rainey Street neighborhood and the Holly Shores neighborhood. Participants seemed to be well-educated and very knowledgeable about City governance. The specific interests of focus group participants included cycling, government transparency, public transit, urban gardening, housing and social justice.

All focus group participants reported being engaged in City initiatives. Several are members of their neighborhood associations or regularly attend neighborhood meetings. Others frequently attend City Council meetings. For the most part, participants were informed of the existence of SpeakUpAustin through other channels of engagement with the City. For example, several participants found out about the website through a neighborhood list serve or because they attended a community meeting. Focus group participants were wary that those participating in SpeakUpAustin are not representative of the population of the City and expressed concerns that many Austin residents, particularly those from minority communities, do not know about the website.

## **Purpose of the website**

A common theme throughout the focus group conversations was confusion about the purpose of the website, which affects how citizens interact with it. One participant stated, “I don’t know what the rules of the game of the site are.” Although participants were unsure of the City’s reasons for developing SpeakUpAustin, they identified several purposes fulfilled by the website. First, the website is viewed as a place where the City can post questions and request feedback on specific topics. Others viewed the site as a place where residents can express concerns or ask questions of City officials – a direct link between residents and the City. Others primarily viewed the website as a place to “crowdsource” ideas. For these residents, the website serves as a forum where they can post their own ideas about City improvements and connect with other residents who have similar aspirations.

Focus group participants differed in their expectations of the website. Some group members wanted the City to be more responsive to ideas and comments that are posted on the site. Others felt the City should only respond to popular ideas. Several participants wanted the site to be a place where residents can share ideas with each other and were afraid that interference from the City could be an obstacle to discussions among residents.

One participant explained,

The more that it can be a space where you can meet up with other people who have ideas or are engaged, then maybe it will generate momentum. And the more that...like it seems like the purpose is much more to have a dialogue space where citizens who care can connect with each other and network and take on an idea and see that there's an interest and go, like start something and develop it more and come back to the City. Less of an automatic response from the City would make me more compelled to go there.

Another participant concurred:

My interest was finding out what other people are thinking. I didn't really care what the City thought. Eventually, I would. With the idea of crowd sourcing, I would hope that the City wouldn't respond right away and let people have a conversation. Because as soon as the City comes in with a "yeah, but"...it's, it kills some of where that's going.

Mismatched expectations for the website create several problems. Without a clear purpose, users do not know what type of outcomes to expect from their interaction. For instance, if a user views SpeakUpAustin as a direct link to their City government, they may post a question and expect a response. However, if the City views SpeakUpAustin as a place to crowdsource ideas, they may only respond to ideas that have received a certain number of votes or comments. Users may become frustrated with a lack of response and discontinue using the site.

### **Website design**

Website design has considerable implications for the success of online political spaces – particularly those attempting to be deliberative (Rose & Sabo, 2010). City staff and the software developers for SpeakUpAustin indicated that Austin residents were not involved in the design of the website. The focus groups

organized for this thesis research were the first formal opportunity that residents had to provide input into how the site should be designed. As described in the Chapter 3, Web 2.0 platforms are defined at least in part by ease of use. The software developers for SpeakUpAustin explained that the site does not have a tutorial because it is designed to be so simple that users do not need instructions. Although focus group participants understood and appreciated the general functionality of the website, they found it difficult to navigate to topics that interested them and were confused by some of the categories of web pages. Items posted on SpeakUpAustin appear in chronological order on the website. Although it is possible to search for a topic of interest, items are not categorized according to topic. Research participants wanted easier ways to find topics that interested them. SpeakUpAustin has four main categories of web pages: ideas, projects, forums and discussions. Projects and forums are initiated by the City – whereas, ideas and discussions are initiated by users. Focus group participants did not understand the differences between these categories.

In addition, SpeakUpAustin does not have an archiving function. Although City staff do attempt to manually archive older posts that have not received much traction with other website users, older posts are not automatically archived. Currently, there are twenty-eight web pages of ideas – including some that were posted two years ago and only have one or two votes. Participants expressed frustration with having to scroll through all of these ideas to find ones they are interested in. In these ways, the design of SpeakUpAustin creates an obstacle to engagement.

## Promotion

Focus group participants agreed that the City should do more to both promote the website to new users and do more to engage current users. One participant said, “There’s been no promotion, no advertising. It’s like the City doesn’t want people to know about it.” A participant who posted an idea that is currently being implemented by the City explained that he had to do a lot of work to promote the idea outside of SpeakUpAustin because the website does not have a “critical mass.” Another participant echoed this idea:

I mean what I've been interested in just has no posts. So it's not...there isn't a social space there. And I got really excited when I saw the format because it seemed like it could be...I hate Facebook conversations. But I really like the idea like we're in a neighborhood that has a big park planning project happening, and I thought yeah, a lot of people were talking kind of frustrated about it on Facebook, but how great that there's a site where you can actually put ideas down, and then people can vote, respond to ideas like going forward. That seemed great, and no one is using it. People are on Facebook, but...and they can log in through Facebook. But no one is using it.

City staff agreed that they have not done enough to promote the website, citing a lack of resources to properly promote SpeakUpAustin. Without these resources, they have relied on word of mouth and promotion through their existing networks, which targets people who are already engaged with the City.

An overwhelming majority of focus group participants visited the website once or twice and then did not go back. They stated that there is not enough activity on the website to make it engaging for them. Many said they forget about the site unless someone reminds them about it.

## **Access**

In order to participate meaningfully, Austin residents need both access to the website and to enough information to understand the issues being discussed on the site. Although one third of Austin residents report speaking a language other than English at home, all of the content on the website is in English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011). It is possible to translate the content into a number of different languages using Google Translate. However, as was discussed in one of the focus groups, Google Translate often does not provide an adequate translation. Focus group participants expressed concern that SpeakUpAustin was not readily accessible to all Austin residents.

A number of participants described not having enough background information to fully understand and engage in an issue. This concern is particularly relevant for projects on SpeakUpAustin that are initiated by the City. For example, one participant described being interested in the Sixth Street Redesign project, explaining:

At least for the Sixth Street site, when I went and I was looking at the options, you know, they were encouraging you to vote, but I really thought like I needed more background information, but I tried to find it on the SpeakUpAustin site. It wasn't there, but it didn't even say 'for more information, you can go here' and then you could read a lot about it, and then you could come back and vote.

Although it is understandable that the City does not want to overload people with information, limiting the amount of background information on SpeakUpAustin may discourage participation from those who do not feel they fully understand an issue.

## Dialogue

One of the reasons the City of Austin developed SpeakUpAustin was to create a space for dialogue, as one City staff member explained, “I think the ultimate purpose for me is to be able to provide Austinites with a place to engage online in conversations that matter about their city.” However, when asked, none of the focus group participants described their interactions with others on SpeakUpAustin as a dialogue. One participant described a typical interaction on the website, “I might reply to someone’s comments and other people might reply to it, but it’s not a real back and forth kind of dialogue.” When asked why they would comment on an idea or in a discussion, participants said they either do so because they agree with something that has been proposed or they disagree. Participants indicated that they do not typically comment to ask questions or to better understand the perspective of the person posting the idea – key components of dialogue and deliberation.

Most focus group participants agreed that SpeakUpAustin provides a safe place to express their opinions, particularly when compared to neighborhood list serves or online newspaper forums. However, they disagreed about the reasons for this. Some felt it was because the site is a “civic space” and is monitored by City staff, while others attributed the relative safety of the site to the small group of users. A few mentioned the fact that the site is not entirely anonymous – you have to create an account in order to post an idea or a comment – as another reason for the amicable discourse. In addition, users have the ability to flag posts that are deemed inappropriate, which provides another means of moderation.

City staff who monitor the site have been surprised by the civility of the discourse on SpeakUpAustin. Although they have had to ask several participants to change their language or tone, they have not had to ban any users.

### **Impact of website**

A key ingredient of meaningful participation is that participation needs to be considered as part of the decision making process. Overwhelmingly, focus group participants identified a lack of understanding of how SpeakUpAustin influences decision-making as the largest obstacle to meaningful participation. None of the focus group participants could identify projects or policies that had been influenced by the website. Several participants offered cynical views of the utility of the website, as one participant explained:

I get the strong impression that the purpose of the website is to be able to say that we have a website that people can send complaints to...I mean, there's a pipeline, what we're talking about is like a pipeline from the person who has the question/complaint to the person who can do something about it, and the SpeakUpAustin website is like this giant moat that can catch all those complaints and all those questions and make sure that they don't interfere with the people who, you know, just want to get their job done, and I can understand, you know, as both of you are saying that a lot of the stuff on the website is just junk...there's just a lot of people who put up suggestions that are either infeasible, incomprehensible...and they all land in that dreaded 'acknowledged' state where there's like 95% of the suggestions have been acknowledged, whatever that means. And it means that somebody's good suggestion and somebody's incomprehensible suggestion sit there side by side.

Several City staff who were included in this research also indicated they were unsure of how the participation generated through SpeakUpAustin makes its way through the decision making process.



Many of the Austin residents who participated in this research were particularly interested in changing city policies. They were unclear of the connection between the website and City Council. Participants noted that those from the City who are responding to ideas are often public information officers – not decision-makers. One participant questioned whether those with the authority to make decisions about the city were supportive of this type of participation tool, saying:

But I've sort of gotten the feeling that there's someone who was really excited about using this tool, and they put it up. But then they never really got the buy in from all the important people who are necessary for a conversation to happen.

City staff indicated that including SpeakUpAustin in the decision-making process represents a cultural shift for the City as an organization. Some departments have been better than others at integrating feedback from the website into their work processes and in demonstrating how this type of participation influenced the outcomes. Staff expressed a need to continue to work with City departments to ensure they are open and responsive to feedback gathered through SpeakUpAustin.

### **Transparency**

One of the prerequisites of deliberative online forums is that the discourse should be driven by public concerns. Although much of the content on SpeakUpAustin is user-generated, the City, as administrator of the website, retains a certain amount of control. City staff members are able to frame the parameters of the dialogue within City-initiated projects, making it difficult for

participants to contest that frame. Again, using the Sixth Street Redesign project as an example, the City proposed four options for the redesign of the streetscape. SpeakUpAustin users were encouraged to vote for their preferred option. However, one participant was interested in making parts of Sixth Street a pedestrian walkway, but this was not one of the options proposed by the City. In addition to framing the conversation, representatives of the City determine when to respond to ideas and which ideas to implement.

Focus group participants disagreed about how the City's influence affects the success of the website. A number of participants felt the site's direct link to the City sets it apart from other online forums where residents discuss City policies, such as cycling advocacy websites and neighborhood list serves. Since the City administers the website, these participants felt the conversations on SpeakUpAustin had, at least potentially, the ability to influence City decision-making. Others felt the direct connection to the City created an adversarial relationship between those contributing to the site and City staff. As one participant explained,

The other big thing is there's a tension between the City employees who participate...there's a tension between them as a representative of the City trying to sort of speak for the City and members of the City trying to collaborate in improving something. And so what I've found is that there's a lot of defensiveness, like you're going there and saying, 'hey I think this is a great idea' and the response, you know you're hoping for is, 'oh wow that is a good idea'...and the response you get is 'oh, the reason we do it like that is because blah, blah, blah'...

City staff also recognized this tension, noting that when they respond to an idea they are officially speaking on behalf of the City. One staff member said it

often takes several hours to craft a single response. Other staff articulated a desire for the website to empower residents to implement their own ideas, stating:

I don't think that we've gotten to the point where we're effectively bridging to action...specifically action that we don't necessarily need to be a part of. And that's really where you get into that, that true democracy piece, which to me is kind of the Nirvana of this whole thing, which is we're providing a platform for folks not only to articulate their ideas, their thoughts and their concerns but also eventually to aggregate around them and do something about them.

Calling for greater transparency, several participants questioned whether SpeakUpAustin was intended to empower residents – or to merely make it appear that the City was interested in residents' input. One participant exclaimed, “You need to break down the walls of democracy. It's not clear that the website is doing that.” Another participant expressed a more cynical view of the power struggle with the City, stating, “You can't fight City Hall.”

## **Summary**

Although most of the participants in the focus groups expressed appreciation that the City initiated SpeakUpAustin, they were generally frustrated by the lack of a clear purpose for the website and elements of the website design. In addition, focus group participants indicated that many Austin residents do not know about the website, and that it is not accessible to non-English speakers. Although most participants felt the website offers a safe place for expressing their opinions, they stated they have not engaged in a dialogue with website users that had different viewpoints. Overwhelmingly, focus group participants were frustrated by the lack of a clear connection between feedback

provided through the website and decisions made by the City. They called for increased transparency of how the City uses input provided through SpeakUpAustin.

### **Website Discourse**

To assess the character of the discourse of SpeakUpAustin, I did a content analysis on two discussion forums: an idea for a bike share program that was proposed by a website user and a discussion prompted by the City of Austin concerning a potential ban on plastic bags. These two topics were chosen because they represent the two ways that discussion initiate on SpeakUpAustin – prompted by site users and by City staff. The bike share program was one of the first ideas posted on SpeakUpAustin and is the idea that has received the most votes. The plastic bag conversation was provided by one City staff person as an example of the potential of the website to facilitate a conversation – and it generated a fair amount of activity on the site.

These conversations were assessed using the categories of democratic communication identified in the Chapter Three of this thesis: liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative. Using qualitative analysis software, comments were categorized according to the indicative metrics established by Freelon (2011) (Table 1, p. 44-45). Although I use the categories established by Freelon (2011), I also recognize the importance of participants' stories and passion, as well as the right of participants to contest the role of the website administrators and the structure of the website.

164  
Vote

# Improve last-mile and recreational transit by installing bike share hubs throughout the urban core



A managed bike share system should be an integral part of the transit discussion. For distances of less than one-mile, these are cost-effective systems of getting urban-Austinites and visitors where they want to get to. The utility of these systems grows with number of stations. A large bike sharing network is also a superb recreational and tourist amenity.

Examples in use:

- 1) BIXI - <http://www.bixi.com/the-stations>
- 2) B-Cycle - <http://www.bcycle.com>
- 3) Nice Ride - <https://www.niceridemn.org>

Targeting the following city departments, and possible stakeholders

- 1) Austin Transportation Dept
- 2) Economic Growth & Redevelopment Office
- 3) CapMetro
- 4) Austin Chamber of Commerce
- 5) Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau

by [Jude Galligan](#) almost 2 years ago 23

Figure 14: Bike Share Program Idea Posted on SpeakUpAustin

A SpeakUpAustin user proposed the idea for a bike share program in Austin soon after the site launched in 2011 (Figure 14). The idea received 164 votes and generated 21 comments from 14 different users, including several responses from City staff. Nearly all of the comments were in support of the idea, with several offering ways to improve on it. Only one person commented in opposition to the bike share program, which may indicate that this issue did not

attract diverse perspectives. There was some back and forth between those who expressed support for the idea and the one person in opposition.

This forum has several of the characteristics of deliberative communication. First, it is public-issue focused. The conversation is related to the role of the City in facilitating a bike share program to improve City transit. In addition, all of the posts in this forum directly address the initial discussion topic. The discussion is not dominated by one or two individuals but is spread out relatively equally among all of the conversation participants. The idea as it was proposed is framed in the context of the common good – improving transit for all Austin city dwellers – and could be considered a rational critical argument.

One important indicator of deliberative forums is the use of questions to better understand a given perspective or to expand on an idea. Of the 21 comments, only three questions were posed, suggesting that most conversation participants had already established their positions on this idea when they commented. This is consistent with how focus group participants described the reasons they comment on an idea – either because they agree or disagree, not necessarily to better understand the perspective of the person proposing the idea. Those questions that were posed were from individuals who stated their support for the idea.

As mentioned earlier, this discussion generated some back and forth between the one person who disagreed with the idea and several supporters. The post that expresses disagreement uses insulting language that could be described as flaming – an indicator of liberal individualist communication (Figure

15). At the same time, the participant is contesting the role of the City in this project and is suggesting that City resources could be put to better use.



Figure 15: Comment on Bike Share Program Idea on SpeakUpAustin

Several supporters of this idea responded to this post, fitting the category of an inter-ideological response. The person in disagreement seems to have a better understanding of the idea proposed, suggesting that the dialogue helped to clarify several of his concerns – particularly about the role of the City.

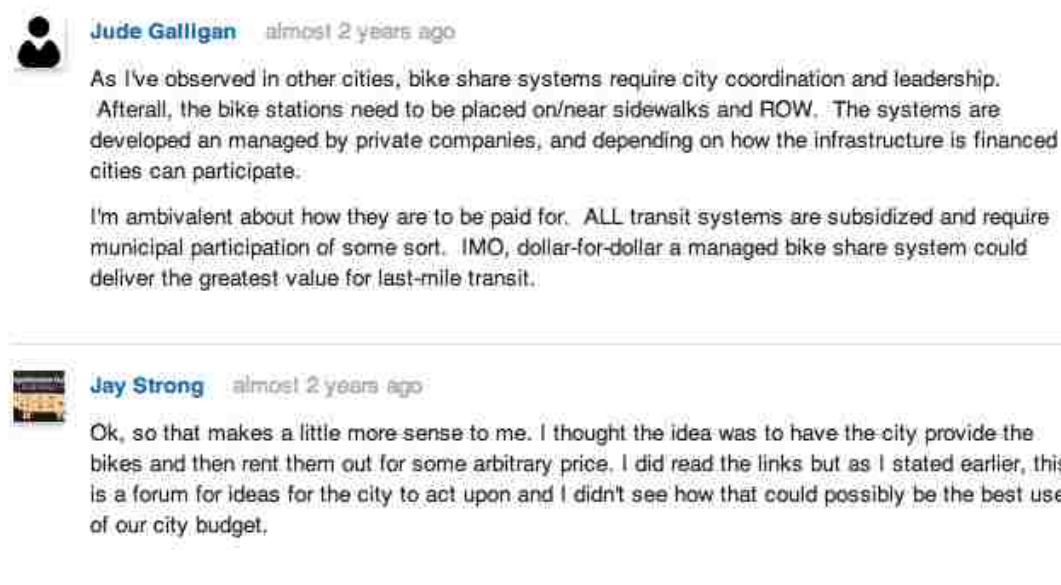


Figure 16: Conversation about Bike Share Program Idea on SpeakUpAustin

Although the conversation about the bike share program contains several elements of a deliberative discussion, it is mostly dominated by monologue –

presenting positions without stating the reasons for the positions. There are several instances of personal revelation. The absence of questions and crosscutting dialogue seem to indicate a liberal individualist model of democracy. It is important to note that this idea is currently being implemented by the City of Austin, although it is not clear that posting the idea on SpeakUpAustin had any direct impact on its implementation.

### Plastic Bag Regulations

The screenshot shows a post on the SpeakUpAustin platform. The main heading is "PLASTIC BAGS" in an orange banner. Below the heading, there is a text area with the prompt "Feel free to share other general comments here." To the right of this area is a "TOPICS" list with the following items: "Scope of Plastic Bag Regulation" (highlighted with an orange arrow), "Type of Regulation", "Other Bags", "Enforcement and Timeline", "Unintended Consequences", "Mitigating the Socio-Economic Impact", and "General Comments".

Below the topics list is a section titled "SCOPE OF PLASTIC BAG REGULATION" with a sub-heading icon. The text in this section reads: "The Austin City Council recently approved a [resolution](#) directing the City Manager to develop a city ordinance providing a comprehensive phase-out of single-use plastic bags offered at retail checkouts within the city limits. This follows a [staff analysis](#) of the cost to taxpayers for processing plastic bags." Below this text are the prompts "Speak up, Austin!" and "Which bags should an ordinance cover? Which distributors of bags (grocery stores, restaurants, dry cleaners, etc.) should be required to follow the ordinance?" followed by the instruction "Answer below and complete [this poll!](#)".

On the right side of the post, there are three sections: "PARTICIPANTS" showing a grid of 20 user avatars, "PROJECTS" listing "Art at the Airport's new rental car facility", "Austin Youth Council", and "Sixth Street Redesign" with an "ALL" link, and "SURVEYS" listing "Comprehensive Urban Forest Plan: Feedback on Vision Statement, Vision Components and Guiding Principles" and "East Sixth Street Redesign".

Figure 17: Post by City Staff on SpeakUpAustin Requesting Feedback on a Plastic Bag Regulation

City staff created a project on SpeakUpAustin to get feedback on a proposal to eliminate single-use plastic bags offered at retail locations. The project included six topics, as well as a place to post general comments. In



addition, participants were encouraged to fill out a survey about the proposed ban. The discussion analyzed for this research was about the scope of the proposed regulation. Participants were asked which types of bags should be included in the regulation and which types of retailers should be regulated.

Fifty-three people participated in this discussion, contributing 89 posts – 54 original comments and 35 responses. The posts were overwhelmingly opposed to the proposed ordinance – 71 expressed opposition while 16 were in favor of the ordinance.

Similar to the discussion about the bike share program, this forum has several characteristics of deliberative communication. Again, this conversation is public issue focused – a potential public policy that will affect all Austin residents and many businesses. For the most part, those participating in the conversation remained on topic, addressing the issue as City staff framed it. The discussion forum is not dominated by any one individual. The most posts by one contributor is ten, meaning that the posts are fairly well distributed among the participants.

The plastic bag discussion contains several posts that could be described as a rational critical argument (Figure 18). However, similar to the bike share



Mike

Plastic grocery bags are an extremely resource-efficient disposable bag choice. Plastic grocery bags require 70% less energy to manufacture than paper bags, and produce half the amount of greenhouse gas emissions in the process. For every seven trucks needed to deliver paper bags, only one truck is needed for the same number of plastic bags, helping to save energy and reduce emissions. It takes 91% less energy to recycle a pound of plastic than it does to recycle a pound of paper.

Oct 31 at 11:24 am

Hide 3 Replies

Figure 18: Example of Rational Critical Argument on SpeakUpAustin

program, this conversation is dominated by monologue. In the 89 posts, only seven questions were asked. There is some crosscutting discussion – 16 posts were in response to individuals who had expressed different opinions (i.e. inter-ideological response).

The plastic bag discussion contains more elements of communitarian communication than the bike share program discussion. Several posts advocated for political action (Figure 19). Sixteen posts were in support of a position stated

by another user (i.e. intra-ideological response).



Figure 19: Example of Communitarian Communication on SpeakUpAustin

Perhaps due to the controversial nature of the proposed ordinance, a number of discussion participants used insults and derogatory language in their posts. This language included threats to vote council members out of office – “I would like to know the names of the idiots that voted this in. I will help vote them out of office.” One participant referred to the City Council as “junk government”. The City staff person who moderates SpeakUpAustin interjected into the conversation several times asking people to refrain from name calling and using obscene language. Although it is understandable that moderator would flag inappropriate language on SpeakUpAustin, the language does express the passion of participants in this discussion. One discussion participant questioned the role of the moderator, suggesting that he was only responding to comments in support of the regulation.

Similar to the discussion of the bike share program, the conversation on SpeakUpAustin about the proposed regulation of plastic bags has more elements

of liberal individualist communication than deliberative. Discussion participants did not show a willingness to sincerely engage with those offering opposing opinions, for the most part did not ask questions to better understand those opinions and overwhelmingly stated their positions without providing reasons or by relying on personal revelation.

### **Summary**

Both of these conversations contained elements of deliberative discourse, but were dominated by speech that falls into Freelon's (2011) category of the liberal individualist, particularly through monologue. The absence of questions suggests that participants were more interested in stating their positions than in learning about other perspectives. However, there were elements of crosscutting dialogue in both conversations. Also, participants in both discussions contested the role of the City, which may be considered an appropriate element of discourse.

## **Chapter Seven: Discussion**

In this chapter, I apply the questions identified as criteria for meaningful participation in chapter five to the findings discussed in the previous section. These questions fall into four categories: characteristics of participants, discourse of participation, participation opportunities and participation outcomes. As part of the implications of the findings, this discussion will include recommendations for changes that could be made to SpeakUpAustin to make it a more engaging, more deliberative space.

### **Analysis**

#### **Characteristics of Participants**

*Is there a broad range of participants engaging in the forum?*

Currently, only a small percentage of the population of Austin is using the website. The demographics of website users who completed their profiles show that the website seems to favor younger people and those with a higher education than the typical Austin resident.

*Does the website engage participants who are not involved in other City initiatives?*

All focus group participants indicated that they are actively engaged with the City of Austin. Since the website is promoted primarily through neighborhood associations, the Community Registry and City-related meetings, focus group participants did not think that residents who are not already engaged are aware

of the website. The demographics of website users who completed their profiles also indicates that many users may already be engaged with the City.

*Is the forum accessible to a broad range of Austin residents?*

Austin residents without access to a computer or the Internet – or the capacity to use these technologies - are not be able to engage with this tool. In addition, the website is not accessible to those residents who do not speak English or who are not comfortable with an online conversation in English.

### **Discourse of Participation**

*Does the website promote deliberative discourse?*

The discourse analyzed on SpeakUpAustin contains several dimensions of deliberation. Discussion topics were public in nature, and for the most part, discussion threads remained on topic. There were examples of presenting a rationale in support of a common good, and the two discussions analyzed in this research included some cross-group responding and questioning. However, the discourse was dominated by personal position statements, characterized as monologue, and included very few questions. This is consistent with how focus group participants described their interactions on the website – typically commenting either in strong agreement or strong disagreement of a position.

*Do users have enough information to participate in the discourse?*

The amount of background information provided for discussion topics and projects varies. For example, an overview provided for a discussion about bicycling in Austin contained seven links to information, directing participants to various reports, Austin's bicycling plan, an updated bicycling map and resources

on bicycling safety. In comparison, the discussion about the redesign of East Sixth Street does not contain any links to background information. Focus group participants indicated they preferred for the City to provide more background information for City-initiated topics on SpeakUpAustin.

*Do users engage in dialogue with those who have expressed an opposing viewpoint?*

None of the twenty-five focus group participants characterized their interaction on SpeakUpAustin as a dialogue. Although the content analysis showed some back and forth between users with different perspectives, the conversation were primarily dominated by position statements, with very few questions being asked of other users. This may indicate that either SpeakUpAustin users do not view dialogue as a reason for using the site or that the design of the website does not promote dialogue.

*Is the website viewed as a safe space to express opinions?*

For the most part, focus group participants viewed SpeakUpAustin as a safe space to express their opinions. In the conversations analyzed for this research, a City staff person interjected at several points asking participants to use respectful language and to avoid name-calling. As the website attracts more users, it will be important to ensure that SpeakUpAustin remains a safe space.

*Is discourse driven by public concerns or by the City?*

SpeakUpAustin contains discourse that is driven by both resident concerns and City initiatives. As a City-administered website, the City maintains a fair amount of control – at least in the “discussions” and “projects” portion of SpeakUpAustin. By setting the parameters of the discussions, the City may be limiting the deliberative potential of SpeakUpAustin. The “ideas” section of the website allows for more user-generated content and has more potential for deliberation. However, the City still has the power to decide which ideas to pursue and which to ignore.

### **Participation Opportunities**

*Does the website offer low to high threshold forms of participation?*

SpeakUpAustin provides a number of different ways for participants to be engaged: filling out a survey, giving feedback on a project, discussing a topic, voting, commenting and proposing ideas. There appears to be a hierarchy of participation from voting, which has the lowest amount of risk, to commenting, which has a moderate amount of risk, to proposing an idea, which has the highest amount of risk. Almost all focus group participants had voted for an idea, while only a few had proposed ideas. In this way, voting can be viewed as a low threshold form of participation, allowing engagement with minimal risk.



*Do participants understand the different ways they can participate through the website?*

Focus group participants did not always understand the different ways they could engage with the site – or the most appropriate place to post their comments. Almost all focus group participants were confused by the categories on SpeakUpAustin, particularly the difference between a discussion and a forum.

*Does the website make it easy for participants to remain engaged?*

Focus group participants overwhelmingly indicated that they visited the site a few times and then forgot about it. They described several reasons for this: the low amount of activity on the site, the difficulty of navigating to topics that interested them and the inability to subscribe to topics or to receive periodic updates.

*Are users able to participate in shaping the structure of the website?*

Austin residents were not included in the development of SpeakUpAustin, and it is not clear if there is a plan to include them in future changes to the website.

## **Participation Outcomes**

*Does participation through the website impact decisions made by the City?*

Focus group participants were not aware of how their participation through the website impacted decisions made by the City. City staff indicated that most departments do consider feedback posted on SpeakUpAustin; however, there

currently is not a practice of reporting back to the people who provided input, indicating how their feedback was used. The two discussions reviewed for the content analysis of this research did not provide any information about what the City would do with feedback they received. Participants in every focus group identified the lack of clarity about how feedback and ideas posted on the site influence decision-making as the biggest weakness of SpeakUpAustin.

*Is the City transparent about the purpose of the website and the ways that participation impacts decisions?*

Although participants had ideas about the purpose of the website, they were unclear of the City's vision for the site. This lack of clarity made it difficult for participants to know whether or not they should expect a response from the City to feedback they posted on the site. The City does formally respond to ideas that have received at least 20 votes or 10 comments, although this threshold is not communicated through the website. Also, the criteria the City uses to determine whether or not to implement an idea is not clear. For instance, the City is moving forward with implementing a bike share program, which is an idea that was posted on the website. However, several research participants noted that the City was already considering this possibility when the idea was posted. Participants recognized that the City is a large, complex organization and that changes often take a long time to implement. However, they requested more transparency to help them understand the decision making process – and how SpeakUpAustin fit into that process. In addition, focus group participants requested a stronger connection between the website and City Council.

*Does the City show that it values the local knowledge that is expressed through the website?*

Although City staff indicated that one of the purposes for the website was to gather ideas from local residents, the lack of clarity about what happens to those ideas makes it difficult to know if the City values the knowledge expressed on the site.

### **Summary**

Data gathered from profiles of SpeakUpAustin users, interviews with City staff, focus groups with Austin residents and content analysis of two discussion topics indicate that SpeakUpAustin is not meeting the goals of City staff or Austin residents – and overwhelmingly, does not meet the criteria for meaningful participation identified in this thesis. Instead of providing a forum for broad, diverse participation – particularly from those not already participating with the City, SpeakUpAustin appears to provide another venue of engagement for those who are already involved in the development of the city. In addition, it is not clear that marginalized communities have sufficient access to the website. Although City staff indicated they wished to promote dialogue through the website, conversations seem to be dominated by position statements, and focus group participants were not able to provide examples of when they had engaged in dialogue on the site.

SpeakUpAustin does provides a convenient way to engage with the City in that participants can choose when and how to participate, and the low threshold participation opportunities allow users to engage in ways that contain minimal

risk. However, the structure of the website – the inability to sort by topic, the inability to subscribe to topics and the ambiguous titles of website pages – diminish the convenience of the forum and may hinder participation efforts. Finally, the lack of a clear connection between SpeakUpAustin and decision-making processes, as well as the lack of transparency about how input influences City initiatives, calls into question the City’s commitment to empowering Austin residents through SpeakUpAustin.

### **Recommendations**

Given the above analysis, I provide recommendations for ways that the City of Austin can improve SpeakUpAustin as a public participation tool – making progress toward meeting the expectations of City staff and Austin residents as well as getting closer to the requirements for meaningful participation identified in this thesis. In addition, recognizing the important role of civil society in shaping places, I outline several recommendations for ways that these entities can engage with the City through SpeakUpAustin.

#### **City of Austin**

##### **Characteristics of Participants**

- 1. Findings indicate that encouraging participants to complete their demographic profiles on SpeakUpAustin would provide the City with a better sense of who is and is not using the website.*

As mentioned earlier in this paper, only about 30% of current registered users have completed their profiles. This lack of information makes it difficult to determine exactly who is – and who is not – participating through the website. To

encourage users to complete their profiles, the City could consider including aspects of social networking that would allow users to connect with others who have similar interests. For instance, if the demographic profile included a user's neighborhood, participants would be able to see what others in their neighborhood are saying.

*2. Findings indicate that the website would benefit from greater activity, which could be achieved by increased promotion and making it easier for current users to remain engaged.*

It is clear from focus group conversations and interviews that the website needs to generate more activity – both attracting new users and by engaging those who are currently registered for the site. The City could do more to promote the website, particularly to groups that are not currently engaged with City initiatives. To do this, the Communications Department may need to allocate additional resources for SpeakUpAustin. Focus group participants had several ideas for greater promotion of the site. Several suggested promoting SpeakUpAustin by highlighting ideas that had been implemented. One participant suggested using the promotional slogan, “Speak Up, Austin, because what you say matters!” Of course, for this slogan to be true, the City would need to show how feedback on SpeakUpAustin matters. Another participant suggested monitoring conversations about city issues on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as Austin-specific websites, and attempting to drive some of this traffic to SpeakUpAustin.

Focus group participants expressed a desire to be more engaged with the website but wanted more reasons to visit it. Again, they had several ideas about how to make the site more engaging. Participants suggested sending a brief weekly email newsletter that could highlight “hot topics” or new projects that the City has initiated. The e-newsletter could also provide updates for ideas that are being implemented. In addition, participants wanted the option of subscribing to certain topics (i.e. cycling or housing) and receiving personalized updates on those topics. The City could also provide updates to those participants who comment on projects or propose ideas. For example, one focus group participant who proposed an idea that is being implemented by the City said he had not received any updates on the progress of the idea. Finally, several participants suggested adding a master calendar to the website which could highlight community meetings that are connected to SpeakUpAustin. This would provide another reason for people to visit the website.

Another way of generating more traffic on SpeakUpAustin would be to build relationships with civil society organizations, particularly those from marginalized communities, and encourage them to contribute to discussion topics and propose ideas on the website. In this way, SpeakUpAustin could serve as a networking site for local organizations, while at the same time broadening and diversifying the participants that are contributing to the site.

Finally, the actual design of the website is another component of engagement. Focus group participants had several suggestions for improving the website experience. Instead of only listing ideas in a chronological order, users

could have the option of sorting ideas to the number of votes or comments – providing users with more control over the website and allowing visitors to quickly see the most popular ideas. In addition, organizing content according to topics would make it easier for users to find ideas that they are interested in.

*3. Findings indicate that the website would benefit from improved access, both in terms of access to technology and access to the capacity to use the site.*

To increase access to the website, participants suggested promoting SpeakUpAustin at public libraries and making computers with access to the website available in public places. Obviously increasing participation with those communities who are not currently engaged with the City will require more than informing them about the website. As one City staff person explained, the City needs to find ways to build face-to-face relationships with these groups before identifying ways for them to be engaged through SpeakUpAustin. In addition, conducting a review of the City's organizational culture may provide insight into why some communities do not engage with the City through these types of participation opportunities. Making the website available in Spanish would be one way of promoting a more diverse user base.

In addition, providing a short tutorial on the website may increase the capacity of participants to use SpeakUpAustin.

### **Discourse of Participation**

*1. Findings indicate that participants would be more likely to use the site if the purpose was clearly stated.*

Clarifying the purpose of the website would help users understand how to interact with the site and could emphasize the desire to promote dialogue among residents and between residents and the City. The purpose could be stated on the home page or explained in a short video. Clarifying the purpose would also assist residents in determining whether or not SpeakUpAustin is the most effective tool for them to use in engaging with the City – or if there are other venues where their participation may be more effective. The City may wish to gather input from SpeakUpAustin users and members of civil society in Austin to determine the best use and purpose of this tool.

*2. Findings indicate that participants would be more likely to engage in deliberation if conversations on the website were facilitated by the City or by a third party.*

If the City wants SpeakUpAustin to be a more deliberative space, City staff could actively facilitate, not only moderate, conversations on the website. This currently happens for select conversations where City staff will engage with participants, asking questions to help clarify their positions, providing background information as needed, etc. However, the vast majority of discussions include very little facilitation, with City staff intervening only to make sure the language being used is appropriate for the space. An active facilitator could also acknowledge the passion of participants and ask clarifying questions when participants use stories to express their opinions. A facilitator could help participants to move beyond positional statements to consider the larger implications of their opinions. In addition, a facilitator could attempt to pull more



users into the conversation. For example, if there is a conversation on SpeakUpAustin about bicycling, the facilitator could contact local bicycling advocacy groups to contribute to the conversation. A facilitator could also help participants understand how the discussion will impact decisions that are made. It is important to note that SpeakUpAustin users may be wary of the City facilitating conversations since it has a stake in the outcome. Alternatively, the City could rely on a third party – or possibly on representatives from local organizations – to facilitate conversations.

In addition to promoting deliberation on SpeakUpAustin, several focus group participants suggested that the City should invite those who have expressed interest in a topic on SpeakUpAustin to a community meeting or a focus group. In this way, the City would be able to connect online deliberation with face-to-face deliberation.

*3. Findings show that participants would benefit from increased access to background information for the topics posted on SpeakUpAustin.*

One of the reasons for the inconsistencies in the amount of background information that is provided on SpeakUpAustin is that different departments in the City create the projects and discussions. Some departments may include background information and others may not. Although many City staff were trained in how to use SpeakUpAustin before it was launched, initiating another round of training for staff may help them better understand the capacity of the website and ensure that those posting to the website are providing the appropriate kinds of background information.

## **Participation Opportunities**

*1. Findings indicate that participants would be more likely to engage with SpeakUpAustin if the types of participation opportunities on the website were clarified.*

City staff and the software developers should find ways to clarify the differences between the categories on the website (discussions, forums, projects and ideas) so that users understand the best place for them to engage.

*2. Findings indicate that low threshold forms of participation could encourage participants to increase their levels of engagement.*

Although SpeakUpAustin does provide opportunities for low threshold forms of engagement, it is not clear that these opportunities lead to increased participation. One suggestion is to prompt users to engage at a higher level. For instance, when someone votes for an idea, the website could encourage that person to also comment or to ask a question to clarify the idea. Or if someone comments on an idea, they could be prompted to propose an alternative idea.

*3. Findings indicate that involving users in the ongoing development of the website may increase its effectiveness.*

Software developers and City staff collaborated to design SpeakUpAustin; however, they did not include input from residents in the design process. Focus group participants provided many helpful suggestions for how the website could be improved. Regularly inviting input from both current users and Austin residents who do not use the website may make the site more responsive to their needs.

In addition to helping with the design of the website, the City could invite local organizations to assist in framing the content of the website. For example, before City staff post a project, they could work with local organizations to establish the parameters of the project, develop questions for the surveys and frame the discussion.

### **Participation Outcomes**

*1. Findings indicate that participants would be more likely to use the website if there was a stronger connection between the site and decisions made by the City.*

Although City staff indicated that most City departments value feedback that is provided through SpeakUpAustin, participants were not aware of how their input was considered. Clearly stating how input provided through SpeakUpAustin is used by the City may make participants more likely to use the website. In addition, ideas posted on SpeakUpAustin are currently given one of a number of statuses. These include “acknowledged”, “referred”, “in progress”, “implemented”, etc. However, focus group participants indicated they did not understand the meaning of these labels and were not clear of how or when an idea moves from one status to another. To improve the transparency of the decision making process, the City should consider adding a progress bar or some type of visual on the site, which shows what happens when an idea is posted or feedback is given. The visual would make it clear where SpeakUpAustin fits into the decision-making process – as well as where a specific idea or comment is within that process.

*2. Findings indicate participants would be more likely to use the website if the responsiveness of the City was increased.*

Focus group participants were unsure of how and when the City would respond to ideas posted on SpeakUpAustin. The criteria used by the City to determine a response should be clearly stated on the site.

In order to increase the responsiveness of SpeakUpAustin, ideas posted to the site could be automatically delivered to the appropriate department or to City Council staff, rather than requiring someone to compile ideas and email those to other departments. The website has the capability to do this, but the City is not currently using that function. Utilizing this function may increase the timeliness of City responses.

Currently, City staff need to take a lot of time to review the volume of comments posted on some of the forums in SpeakUpAustin. This both increases the response time of the City and makes it difficult for City staff to identify themes in these conversations. Granicus, the software company that manages the development of SpeakUpAustin, is exploring this possibility of incorporating text analytics and sentiment analysis. This would provide a way of categorizing all of the feedback delivered through the website, making it more useful for City staff.

*3. Findings indicate the website may benefit by a review of the resources that are allocated to its administration.*

City staff identified a lack of resources – both finances and personnel – as one of the reasons the website has not reached its potential as a public participation tool. Other findings described in these recommendations indicate

the website may benefit from increased facilitation of discussions, increased responsiveness by the City to input provided through the website and increased promotion. These recommendations, if implemented, would require additional financial and human resources.

*4. Findings indicate participants may be more likely to use the website if it provided more opportunities for them to collaborate with other residents.*

Focus group participants understood that the City would not be able to implement every idea posted on SpeakUpAustin. They were interested in finding more ways to collaborate with other residents to implement ideas that were not being pursued by the City. To do this, the City could use SpeakUpAustin to facilitate activities that are implemented by residents by connecting those interested in a certain idea with organizations that are working in that arena, providing a space for residents to physically meet about the idea and providing technical support. To do this effectively, there would need to be a clear distinction on the website between the types of ideas implemented by the City and those implemented by residents.

Related to this recommendation, the City could consider allowing local organizations to use SpeakUpAustin to gather information that is important for their purposes. For example, a neighborhood association may want to use the website to survey the opinions of their residents about a new planning initiative. This would allow local organizations to benefit from the website and provide a space for more localized networking opportunities.

## **Civil Society**

Focus group participants and City staff indicated that Austin enjoys a robust civil society. Focus group participants were active in a number of organizations: biking coalitions, urban gardening groups, open government advocacy groups, etc. In this section of the thesis, I outline several recommendations for ways that civil society, particularly marginalized communities, can strategically participate in the development of Austin through SpeakUpAustin.

*1. Findings indicate that civil society may benefit by strategically not engaging through SpeakUpAustin.*

As mentioned in the previous section, SpeakUpAustin is not currently meeting the expectations of City staff or Austin residents. Providing value – both in terms of individual experiences and in influencing outcomes – is a vital part of meaningful participation. Individuals and organizations interested in influencing the development of Austin may strategically choose to not engage with SpeakUpAustin because of its current underperformance. Instead, these entities may have greater success in influencing the development of Austin through other participation venues – public meetings, neighborhood associations, advocacy groups, etc.

2. *Findings indicate that civil society may benefit by assisting City staff in changing the organizational culture of Austin City government.*

City staff have indicated they are hopeful that developments such as SpeakUpAustin will help to shift the culture of the city to be more inclusive, responsive and adaptive. Civil society participants may have a greater voice in the development of the city as the culture changes. Therefore, these entities may benefit by assisting City staff in creating this change. Members of Austin's civil society could promote the website to encourage more activity – and then apply pressure to the City to be more responsive and transparent in administering the site.

3. *Findings indicate that civil society may benefit from horizontal communication through SpeakUpAustin.*

SpeakUpAustin provides a space for horizontal communication between Austin residents. If the City welcomes increased participation from local organizations and individuals in creating the structure and content of the website (as recommended in the previous section), members of Austin's civil society, particularly those from marginalized communities, could use the website to bring attention to injustice and to build networks of support.

### **Conclusion**

Applying the criteria for meaningful participation to SpeakUpAustin demonstrates both the potential of this participation tool and improvements that could increase its effectiveness. Although there are elements of deliberative

discourse on the website, increased facilitation of conversations and improved access to background information may help to make SpeakUpAustin a more deliberative space. Focus group participants did not think the website was reaching Austin residents who are not already engaged with the City. Increased promotion of the site and improved access may increase the diversity of SpeakUpAustin users, enriching the knowledge that is produced through the website. The website does offer a range of participation opportunities. However, changes in the design of the website and regular updates to users may make it a more engaging space. Finally, although City staff indicated that feedback provided through SpeakUpAustin is taken into consideration, stronger connections between the website and the decision making process, as well as increased transparency of the administration of the website, may attract more participants and increase the website's effectiveness.

In addition, it is important to consider the role of civil society in shaping, not only the physical space of Austin, but also the virtual space of SpeakUpAustin. Civil society can play an important role in creating a more engaged, effective space – but only if their participation is welcomed and encouraged by the City of Austin.



## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion, Limitations & Future Research**

In this thesis, I argue that public participation is not merely another step in urban planning processes; rather, it is a foundation on which the success of the profession lies. As the forces of capitalism emphasize the exchange value of places, the forces of democracy, through public participation, must counter by promoting and protecting the use value of places. The history of public participation in urban planning in the U.S. calls into question the ability of experts to plan the city and the wisdom of excluding large groups of people, particularly the poor, in the development of those plans.

Responding to these calls, some planning practitioners and theorists are shifting the paradigm away from top-down expert driven planning to increased collaboration among a broad, diverse group of stakeholders. The role of the planner in this shift is to facilitate a process where the appropriate use value of places can be negotiated. To learn from the mistakes of the past, planners should promote participation that democratizes the profession, that values local knowledge and that promotes social justice.

I contend that communicative action planning, with its emphasis on discourse, collaboration and inclusion, offers a framework for facilitating conversations to reach agreement about the future of our cities. However, although consensus and agreement may at times be possible, planners should also recognize the important role of conflict – particularly as a strategy of the dispossessed- in the struggle to define the city.

In an increasingly networked world, communication technology provides a tool to engage a larger, more diverse group of participants, to make information more accessible and to increase the transparency of government decision making. Planners can tap into local knowledge through crowdsourcing, and social movements can use the increased horizontal connections facilitated by the Internet to influence planning decisions.

Although these tools are now readily available in our Web 2.0 world, questions remain about their ability to transform the role of the public in urban planning. As the case study for this research exemplifies, the transformative potential of communication technology often remains just that – potential. Communication technology has the potential to create a space for dialogue but also has the potential to be another platform for the loudest voices. It has the potential to discover and create local expertise – but it also has the potential to provide another means of control by technical expertise. Communication technology can build networks among marginalized communities, but it can also build walls that further exclude these communities.

In order to utilize these communication tools effectively, planners need to create processes that promote *meaningful* participation – fostering deliberation, welcoming diverse participants, providing a variety of participation opportunities and including the results of participation in decisions that are made. Applying these criteria to SpeakUpAustin through an analysis of the demographics of website users; focus groups and interviews with Austin residents and City staff; and a content analysis of two discussion topics, I suggest that SpeakUpAustin

can be improved as a public participation tool. My recommendations for improvements are:

- Clarifying the purpose of the website;
- Facilitating conversations to increase deliberation;
- Increasing promotion of the website, particularly among residents not currently engaged with the City;
- Including more background information on City-initiated topics;
- Encouraging more users to complete their demographic profiles;
- Finding ways to increase activity on the website;
- Increasing access to the website;
- Clarifying the participation opportunities available on the site;
- Helping participants move from low to high threshold forms of engagement;
- Involving users in the ongoing development of SpeakUpAustin;
- Strengthening the connection between the website and decisions made by the City;
- Improving the responsiveness of City staff on the website;
- Reviewing the resources allocated for the site;
- Providing more opportunities for residents to collaborate with each other.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations restricted the effectiveness of this research. First, I was not successful in recruiting non-website users for focus groups. These users may

have provided a helpful perspective to make SpeakUpAustin more accessible to those not currently using the platform. Second, since the City and Granicus provided the venue for focus groups, all of these meetings were held downtown, which may have affected who was and was not able to attend. Third, due to the limited amount of time I was able to spend in Austin, I was able to offer a limited number of slots for these groups, which did not work for a number of residents who expressed interest in my research. Finally, since I relied on the Community Engagement Consultant to recruit focus group participants, those residents without formal connections to the City may have been excluded.

### **Future Research**

As demonstrated in this thesis, there is an abundance of literature on the role of communication technology in promoting democracy and participation. However, this research is primarily descriptive or theoretical in nature. There appears to be a paucity of research on the actual experience of users of these technologies – and their perception of the effectiveness of communication technology to enhance democracy and promote meaningful participation. The research approach used for this thesis could be replicated in other geographic areas and for other technology platforms. In addition, this thesis focused on public participation facilitated by government agencies. Increasingly, private entities – both non-profit and for profit- are using communication technology to facilitate participation in urban planning. This research approach could be applied to private initiatives to see if they are more or less successful than those facilitated by government agencies. Finally, the design of this research could be

applied to urban social movements to identify meaningful participation in those contexts and then evaluate how technology utilized by these movements facilitates meaningful participation.

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