Dan Milz and Curt D. Gervich

Viewpoint
Participation and the pandemic: how planners are keeping democracy alive, online

Overview

A recent public-comment letter to a municipal planning board:

> Dear Planning Board Members:
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> All non-essential government meetings, including this Planning Board meeting, should be postponed. The Planning Board has the authority to do that. The hasty scheduling of this non-essential meeting during the COVID-19 pandemic is a blatant attempt by City leadership to push a controversial project through with as little public participation as possible …
>
> However, if you insist on conducting a virtual meeting, then we would respectfully request and suggest that you create and <u>keep open a sign-up list</u> of people who would like to speak at the meeting. <u>The list should remain open until the meeting begins and even during the meeting.</u> This approach most closely resembles the past practice in which people are free to raise their hand during the meeting if they feel so inclined to make a comment. Remember that often people are shy about public speaking. But sometimes something that they learn during a meeting or something that is said may inspire that person to raise their hand and ask to be heard. That same practice should be continued in a virtual meeting, or you can't say that you're doing everything in your power to create a continuum of the [Municipal] Planning Board meetings.
>
> – Concerned Residents

This letter, and dozens like it, sets the stage for a discussion about deliberative democracy among the public and local government in one community in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic has paved the way for a multitude of experiments in e-democracy as local governments strive to continue to hold public meetings; make and implement plans; issue permits, variances and zoning decisions; and gather public input while under quarantine. This paper anecdotally discusses the role of online participatory technologies (OPTs) during this time.

Dan Milz is Assistant Professor, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Urban & Regional Planning, 2424 Maile Way, Saunders Hall, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822-2217, United States; Curt D. Gervich is Associate Professor, SUNY Plattsburgh, Center for Earth and Environmental Science, 101 Broad Street, Plattsburgh, New York 12901, United States; email: dmilz@hawaii.edu; cgerv001@plattsburgh.edu

Amidst the obvious impacts, COVID-19 also represents a threat to public participation. Because meeting in person is too risky, local leaders are cautious about hosting meetings in which citizens, government agents and elected officials gather together in one place. Consequently, municipal and county governments, among others, are taking the public's business online. The purpose of this Viewpoint is to jump-start a conversation about how we prepare planners for a future in which in-person meetings are not guaranteed and how planners might continue to incorporate new technologies when face-to-face meetings resume.

Background

Planners have been trained to design community engagement processes and meetings to ensure meaningful participation for the past five decades (Arnstein, 1969). Our methods continue to evolve, though the desired outcomes – empowerment, consensus, advocacy, inclusion, trust, learning, conflict resolution and deliberation – remain stable. Participatory planning creates opportunities for stakeholders to co-produce plans alongside, in response to, and independently of government agencies. It develops stakeholders' capacity for implementation, allows for institutional experimentation and helps non-experts embrace the complexity of wicked problems.

During the same period, software developers have designed digital tools to support planning processes (Potts, 2020; Couclelis, 1991). Planners use these tools to communicate information, to help stakeholders share their interests, to sketch and consider alternatives, and to reveal opportunities for compromise. More recently, these tools have been augmented by advances in networking technology to promote virtual participation in planning processes. Online participatory technologies support engagement among stakeholders and government officials without convening in-person meetings (Afzalan and Muller, 2018). Online participatory technologies come in two forms: synchronous ([S]OPTs), which allows participants to interact at the same time (e.g. video conferencing), and asynchronous ([A]OPTs), which does not (e.g. social media).

After two decades of use, [A]OPTs are familiar to planners and citizen stakeholders. They are often designed to facilitate the dissemination of information from planners and/or the receipt of comments from the public (Mandarano and Meenar, 2015). Some communities have custom-built platforms for gathering, organising and responding to virtual public comments, while others have relied on purchasing software from commercial vendors. Crowdsourcing is another form of virtual, asynchronous public participation. Crowdsourcing relies on the 'wisdom of the crowd' to find answers to complicated questions by asking stakeholders to voluntarily share information. In other cases, crowdsourced data, like location data, are scraped from proprietary sources and used to inform planning and policy making without much direct public input. Governments also embrace social media to share information with the public,

gather public feedback and organise stakeholders. Likewise, citizens adopt social media for community organising and mounting protests.

In contrast, uptake of [S]OPTs have been slower (Williamson and Parolin, 2013). Research on the use of synchronous digital tools in planning has only emerged within the last decade, and reported findings are scarce. This gap may show that the norms of the planning profession reinforce and legitimise face-to-face interactions over electronic media for solving complex challenges (Slotterback, 2011). It is for these reasons and others that planners have been reluctant to widely adopt [S]OPTs … until now.

The pandemic has forced planners to adopt [S]OPTs and adapt their practices, and it has revealed a blind spot in our knowledge about the impact of [S]OPTs on participatory planning processes. Only recently have governments been open (legally and practically) to adopting [S]OPTs – many only in response to the pandemic. In the United States, for instance, state governors have relaxed many of the requirements for face-to-face public meetings in their jurisdictions in conjunction with stay-at-home orders. Those regulatory changes have created the opportunity for local governments to try out [S]OPTs for public meetings for the first time. Thus we are now witnessing a multitude of ad hoc field trials in electronic participatory democracy, and planners and public administrators are learning on the fly.

In the next section, we document some initial observations about the transition to [S]OPTs drawn from our experiences as practitioners, discussions with colleagues and current events. This review precedes a more systematic study of online participatory planning during the pandemic that is currently under way.

What have we learned?

Behold! The gizmo works! Sort of …

Our first and most optimistic takeaway is that [S]OPTs work. There are glitches and contextual features that need to be considered, but we are learning that virtual participation is a viable and realistic alternative to face-to-face engagement. For instance, the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission recently hosted a virtual public forum for their Bay Adapt Regional Strategy for a Rising Bay planning process. The meeting included panel presentations and break-out discussions which afforded stakeholders an opportunity to influence an adaptive management plan for San Francisco Bay (San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, 2020). Successful experiments such as this are occurring throughout the world as planners strive to continue developing and implementing plans during the pandemic. This outcome should expand planners' toolkits and encourage analysts to study virtual participation on its own – not only as a companion for in-person engagement.

It should also encourage elected officials and other decision makers to declare the legitimacy of virtual forms of public participation more broadly.

While elements of the transition to ^{S}OPTs may be characterised as successful, we recognise that communication technologies have limitations. Some limitations are marginal. For instance, a popular video conference app does not include a built-in timer to support formal deliberations that require timed comment periods, leaving many communities to adapt creative solutions on their own. Others are more problematic. For example, the Honolulu Rail Transit project in Hawaii is a decades-long transit planning effort. The project is contentious and meetings are often packed with vocal participants. Project managers recently hosted a public meeting using a video conference application; however, that platform crashed because it was unable to handle the volume of online participants (Honore, 2020). Advancements in technology and end-user ingenuity will likely reduce or eliminate these limitations.

An unfamiliar learning curve

Synchronous online technologies offer an array of tools that may achieve many of the outcomes of face-to-face meetings, though differences exist. Because ^{S}OPTs have had limited application to date, planners lack hands-on experience with these technologies. During quarantine, planners are learning to use new tools, working around their quirks and reflecting on past trials. For example, a community in upstate New York, determined to hold planning board meetings, developed a protocol for submitting public comments regarding project proposals that relied on ^{A}OPTs. After a series of meetings, and being roundly criticised by board members and the public for not allowing synchronous participation, the planning board changed course. They learned how to make the real-time virtual participation of large numbers of participants work as their comfort and familiarity with the technology grew. They also learned that inadvertent mistakes can influence the outcomes of meetings, such as when a municipal employee tasked with hosting video conferences accidentally discharged a member of the public from a meeting. The mistake was innocent but one person's inadvertent mistake feels to another like being kicked out of a meeting and having the door slam behind you. Just as a learning curve exists for city employees, it also exists for members of the public. Citizens, accustomed to the formats of traditional public hearings, are struggling to communicate their concerns to decision makers who only appear online.

Physical and psychological limits

Participating virtually requires more effort. This includes more upfront investment to design and execute meetings and a dedicated effort to sustain engagement over

time. Video conferences, in particular, are physically and psychologically taxing. Meetings take longer and require sustained focus, and participants express physical and psychological exhaustion during and after meetings. Everyone must work harder to listen closely, to be mindful of the strain of extensive screen use, and ignore distractions. Additionally, communication cues that mediate face-to-face interactions are less apparent in OPTs. This can lead to unpleasant interactions, disagreements and conflict that might not occur otherwise. For instance, some video conferencing applications are designed to limit interruptions by transmitting the audio from one microphone at a time, altering the dynamics of discussion. Thus meeting facilitators need to be even more tuned in to non-verbal cues, which in large meetings may mean scrolling through multiple screens of participant thumbnails as screen sizes do not allow a full view of all participants.

Changing roles and shifting power dynamics

The transition to OPTs requires us to rethink roles and power dynamics because of our unfamiliarity operating in these settings. This shift creates new roles for planners for which we may not be trained. One municipality has appointed a municipal employee as point person for managing OPTs during the pandemic. This individual operates the switchboard during video conferences, controlling features like video, audio, chatting, screen sharing and admitting attendees. Previously independent planning-board meetings are now overseen by a mayoral appointee. Furthermore, traditional public meetings include props to distinguish participants' roles. Nameplates, microphones, lecterns and public galleries communicate roles and reinforce power dynamics. OPTs alter these signals and the dynamics they imply. In formal meetings – such as those that are 'on the record' and where legislation is adopted – this may disrupt well-understood rules of order (i.e. parliamentary procedure). Common strategies for facilitating structured meetings thus may take on new importance and require strict enforcement. In less formal settings, like design charrettes, OPTs may make collaborative dialogue that leads to innovation more difficult to achieve.

Equity and access

The pandemic makes the digital divide more salient. Not all places and people have the same level of access to high-speed Internet. Some stakeholders are likely to have technical issues, or may not be able to join at all. This may eliminate their desire to participate in future planning meetings. It is unclear how these topics relate to geographic and social variables, and we leave it others to fill in the details about who can engage, when and by what means. One aspect of OPTs that we highlight is the opportunity to provide reasonable accommodations for the differently abled and

anyone who has difficulty attending public meetings. OPTs can also give glimpses of stakeholders' personal lives that alter the dynamics of engagement. For example, video conferencing may provide virtual windows into our homes or offices, changing our assumptions about each other's lives. Previously, public meetings occurred in civic spaces. They now occur in our homes. Simultaneous to participating in meetings, stakeholders are caring for infants, homeschooling children, preparing meals, tending to pets and so on. These shifts may carry consequences for how stakeholders view themselves and others, humanising our experience and providing an opportunity to build empathy and reduce conflict.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the coronavirus pandemic is pushing planners to use OPT in new ways and under time constraints, allowing them to keep democracy alive online. While virtual democracy or 'e-democracy' has matured over the last two decades, most of the tools are designed to augment face-to-face meetings rather than replace them. The use of synchronous OPT has been under-studied by planning scholars relative to asynchronous approaches. Consequently, planners may be using digital technologies ineffectively because of limited training, limited hands-on experience and limited guidance from the planning literature. This may result in plans that fail to serve communities, the environment, the economy and other sectors of society. Worse still, the ineffective use of OPTs may amplify the typical challenges of participatory processes, foster conflict and division among stakeholders, and ultimately stymie deliberative discourse.

We argue that we cannot afford to lose the forums in which we gather to declare our interests; to discuss, debate and settle our differences; and to make plans for our future. We cannot lose the places where we come together to share stories, to deliberate about next steps and to collectively heal. We cannot afford to lose any opportunity for direct, participatory democracy. Online participatory technologies offer hope and new spaces to carry out this work at a time when planners' core functions – promoting interaction, deliberation and social innovation – are challenged.

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