

Cross-media Public Participation

by Chris Haller, chris@placematters.org

Democracy is communication. Obviously it's more than that, but in contemplating the key elements of healthy democratic decision-making, it is helpful to think about democracy as simply a communication process between the governing and the governed.

-- adapted from Ewert, Fazlic & Kollbeck: E-Demokratie

In order to foster this relationship, political communication has to adapt to the rapidly changing communication practices of our society. Computers and mobile phones have become widely adopted communication devices, each supporting a broad variety of interwoven communication media. Across the spectrum, audiences have developed completely different patterns of communication. Following the convergence of communication media, as well as diverging habits of communication within different target stakeholder groups, there is a growing need in civic engagement efforts to offer multiple channels of participation in order to be inclusive.

Recently, lots of experiments have been made exploring the use of the internet for political involvement (often labeled as eDemocracy or eParticipation). Online engagement methods have evolved and matured, sometimes imitating face-to-face approaches and often built on one specific software platform. Case studies and academic research surrounding these applications have shown that the web is not replacing traditional ways of civic engagement – it's expanding the set of tools in the toolbox. But the interaction between these different channels of participation still needs to be refined and best practices identified. Further exploration into cross-media approaches that integrate face-to-face and online techniques is needed, especially since rapid technological advancements offer new possibilities on a weekly basis.

As a simplified framework, cross-media participation can be regarded as a matrix with a timeline reflecting the different stages of the process on the horizontal axis and the different communication channels on the vertical axis. As a project progresses through its phases, communication technologies can play a critical role in horizontally integrating the flow of information from one stage to the next. Process design and incorporation of cross-media into a project needs to start early in the outreach phase, keeping participants engaged throughout the whole project. Vertical integration is necessary to assure comprehensive results and consensus across the different channels of participation. It adds variety to the project and provides multiple points-of-entry for someone to become engaged in the process and enables a broader swath of citizens to exchange opinions and deliberate on issues across various venues.

What are the benefits of offering multiple channels to participate in public processes and where are the shortcomings? The examination of several case studies that used cross-media approaches to engage citizens in planning projects led to the following observations:

- Offering multiple participation channels for different target groups generally helps to diversify the group of participants and therefore the spectrum of opinions that go into the decision-making process. New communication media offer convenient ways to engage citizens interested in the topic or already actively engaged, as well as attract a broader audience. Reaching certain demographics, like youth or the disenfranchised segments of a community, is always a challenge and requires special outreach strategies – a challenge that advances in technology can't solve alone.
- Face-to-face events will always play an important role in kicking off public projects and building trust among participants and decision-makers. They are important milestones at the end of key phases of the project, giving citizens, politicians and the press, a more public event to value the outcomes of the process.
- Successful projects integrate public relations, outreach and participation as an ongoing process. A wide variety of outreach channels, like flyers, posters, newsletters, online banners, events etc. serve as points-of-entry to generate awareness around target audiences and lure them into other participation channels most convenient to them. If used the right way, multipliers like community leaders, press and celebrities can leverage these efforts and help spread the word.
- Cross-media elements that help bridge different phases are important to keep participants on board over the course of longer projects. This could be as simple as flyers distributed at events that will lead passersby to participate in the online discussion, reminder emails that advertise the links to the next phase, or even reminders like refrigerator magnets showing logo and web address. As push media, online elements like emails, sms etc. tend to have a stronger effect, but are more likely to be perceived as spam.
- Key to successful horizontal integration of participation channels is the right selection of participation methods. One project in Berlin, for example, generated ideas for a participatory city budget in face-to-face meetings using the open space technology, online via online dialogues and via mail. While the first two channels produced ideas after a process of public deliberation, the mailed ideas were unrefined. A second phase was needed to give the participants the possibility to prioritize the compiled list, ultimately fulfilling the goal of one collaborative set of results. Several techniques help reach this goal. First, facilitators, volunteers and committees can help carry the input from one into another channel. Second, multiple phases can be used to merge results in between and spread ideas across channels. And third, tie-ins like broadcasting events through webcasts and local TV can help bridge different channels. All these possibilities still barely enable deliberation, meaning the direct exchange of opinions, between participants through separate venues is often limited.

- Online project websites, whether they serve as a participation channel or simply for information, are commonly utilized to collect and document results generated through different venues. This helps in preparation of following phases, makes the results publicly available to press and other citizens and helps archive the results.

These observations lead to the following list of cornerstones of successful cross media participation design. This list is a work in progress due to the lack of best practice examples. We encourage your additions at <http://www.placematters.org/crossmedia>.

1. **Timing:** The more participation channels are offered, the more important it is to time them appropriately with regards to their different needs and processes. Online forums, surveys, and feedback mechanisms work better if there is a clear beginning and end to the invitation to participate.
2. **Public Relations:** Finding the right mix between widespread elements with limited content (emails, flyer, ...) and content-rich elements with a smaller pull-factor (websites, events, ...) helps to attract a broad audience and provides them with the necessary information to participate.
3. **Continuing engagement:** A well-refined timeline supported with the right communication tools for each step of the process is key to keeping the audience engaged over the course of longer projects.
4. **Website as Base:** Project websites are the key places to provide information about project, deal with important issues, document the process, and share results. Project websites can serve as the hub for all other channels of participation.
5. **Cross-media Kickoff:** Successful participation begins before the official start. Signing up users during the outreach campaign helps to prevent a slow start and an empty online forum. Media partnerships and political backing can bring attention to the kickoff meeting – all these little steps will strengthen participation in later phases.
6. **Compatible Methods:** Different participation channels might build on different methods, but will ultimately need to have comparable results to produce a collaborative and balanced outcome.
7. **Extended Offerings:** Neighborhood walks, information fairs, open door events – all these additional offerings educate the participants and raise the discussion to a higher level, while offering a great point-of-entry to different participation channels.
8. **Inclusive and Transparent Results:** Using different phases, facilitation techniques or other measures, the results coming from different venues have to be consolidated in a fair and equal way. Loops help to exchange ideas and opinions between various channels.
9. **Flow:** Participation channels should be continuous, to prevent exclusion of certain audiences half way through the project.

10. **Cross-media Finish:** Final events should merge all channels of participation to finalize and celebrate results, gain political influence and news worth for traditional media outlets.

A lot of the points listed as well as cross-media public participation itself are not necessarily new. Bringing together multiple events or using a variety of different media as outreach channels have always been key to successful citizen engagement. But with rapid changes going on around communication technologies, we need to rethink everyday practices and develop a new framework to keep public participation projects up to date.