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Searching for City Hall, Digital Democracy, and Public-Making Rhetoric: U.S. Municipal Websites and Citizen Engagement

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Abstract

U.S. cities rely on their websites to enhance citizen engagement, and digital government portals have been promoted for decades as gateways to participatory democracy. This study, through rhetorical and qualitative content analyses, focuses on 200 municipal homepages from 2017 and the ways they invite participation through public-making rhetoric. The findings reveal very few cities have: platforms for interactive discussions; representations of citizen activities; or ways to call citizens into being for the important work of shared governance.

Introduction

The idea of a town hall evokes many images and actions, including citizens voting, people dissenting or cooperating, discussions of issues in a quintessential town square, and more. These real-world, face-to-face activities have merged with new images and metaphors during the growth of digital government websites and social media. Metaphors related to an idealized digital town hall may be found in the earliest days of web-based protocols in the early 1990s. For instance, former U.S. Vice President Al Gore talked about the global information infrastructure as a metaphor for democracy itself, not only a “metaphor for a functioning democracy, (but) it

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will in fact promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making” (Gore, 1994, para. 17). Scholars have joined him in creating nostalgic, optimistic, and idealized metaphors for digital democracy (Lanham, 1993; Meyrowitz, 1985), and other public-policy makers continue those ideas today (Latorre, 2011; Manatt, Blake, Mathews, & Schneider, 2011; Newsom & Dickey, 2013). In this line of thinking, technology brings McLuhan’s idealized global village to life, restoring “participatory democracy of the Greek agora and the Colonial New England town meeting” (Poster, 1990, p. 123) or creating a digital citizenville (Newsom & Dickey, 2013). However, one scholar asserts that technologists’ celebration of digital democracy and interactivity “remains both premature and largely unexamined” (Andrejevic, 2006, p. 391). Other scholars have focused on ways that digital spaces were unsuitable for egalitarian exercises of citizenship and discussion (Grossman, 1996; Herring, 1993, 1996; Lambiase, 2010; Rakow, 1988). One described these spaces as a “wild, wild West” (Brail, 1996, p. 141), and that frontier imagery remains in place. More recently, web-based spaces have emerged as “a new frontier of civic engagement,” with government quickly working “to meet their citizens in this digital space” (Fiorenza, 2014, p. 2). Scholars who study digital citizen engagement, however, point to the problems in bringing these promises to fruition (Chadwick, 2011; King & Nank, 2011; Shueh, 2015; Zheng, Schachter, & Holzer, 2014).

Websites represent the most popular tool for providing information to citizenry at all levels of government (Rosen, 2014). Since the 1990s, municipal, state, and federal government websites in the United States have grown to serve not only the largest national agencies, but also the smallest towns and school districts. A snapshot taken in 2014 of the number of .gov domains shows that about 1,300 sites were registered from the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government as part of 5,300 sites nationwide serving federal, state, and local governments (Mill & Brooks, 2014). Criteria for using the .gov domain have changed over the decades, with some municipal sites using other domains such as .net, .com, and .org; even federal sites may use different domains, such as .mil and .com (Domain requirements, n.d.; Mill & Brooks, 2014; Zahra, 2016). Municipalities may have dozens of URLs at work, and some of the largest cities may have hundreds of web pages. In a 2015 inventory for New York City’s web presence, 343 distinct sites for that single city were discovered, some dating back to 2003 and available online, most in error (Raths, 2016). While the number of civic websites—as well as the overall size and capabilities of those sites—has grown quickly over the past three decades, their perceived effectiveness often remains low (Raths, 2016).

This digital evolution has made meeting all expectations for government websites difficult work and “no small feat” (Girardin, 2015, para. 2). Even when addressing citizen engagement more generally, “it is not always clear what the government can and should do in this regard” (Svara & Denhardt, 2010, p. 4). This project seeks to consider these expectations for digital citizen engagement, especially the role city websites play in inviting digital citizen engagement and these sites’ use of public-making rhetoric, including images and textual artifacts. Scholarly approaches of this kind are needed “for actual civic discourse” that is visible, concrete, and available to anyone, rather than idealized discussions of engagement (Kock & Villadsen, 2012,

p. 5). Since city websites provide accessible information with the potential for citizen engagement, they provide a lens through which to view digital public making at work. This study analyzes 200 city websites to gauge their efforts at digital outreach to citizens. It includes a special focus on spaces set aside for civic discourse, including public-making invitational rhetoric and symbols as well as other evidence of exchanges or connections among and between residents and municipal officials.

Background and literature review

Many disciplines and professional tribes must work together to create municipal websites that are accessible, understandable, and easy to use, not to mention meeting other goals pushed by competitions for government site awards, such as being “memorable, modern, unique and free of frustrating glitches” (Girardin, 2015, para. 2). Within a city, many groups may participate in building websites with participation platforms, such as city managers, communication and technology professionals, as well as department representatives and elected officials (Chadwick, 2011; International City-County Management Association, 2011). Knowledge about technology and citizen engagement—as well as rhetoric, audience, and public-making functions—is critical during the development of these municipal websites and their homepages. The following three sections address these critical knowledge bases—technology, citizenship engagement, and rhetoric and public making—through both theoretical and professional perspectives.

Technology

A city’s digital presence is important, since 88% of U.S. citizens use the Internet, 77% own smart phones, 73% have broadband services at home, and 69% use social media sites (Smith, 2017). These connections mean local government can leverage citizen input in powerful ways with scholars and citizen-engagement advocates urging cities to do so by investigating and building digital citizen intelligence platforms (Desouza & Smith, 2014; Fiorenza, 2014; Krzmarzick, 2013). In a survey of government communicators by Adobe in 2014, websites were named as the most widely used tool, ahead of all other traditional and digital formats (Rosen, 2014). In the same study, websites were selected as one of the most important communication investments for the future. The executive director of the Center for Digital Government said citizen expectations of government websites have changed over the past 20 years with the best sites leading the transformation “toward more integrated, anticipatory and personalized electronic services” (Center for Digital Government, 2016, para. 4). Websites continue to be essential communication tools for government entities, including cities, by remaining “one of the most important ways constituents interact with their representatives,” despite “all of the bells and whistles of social media, mobile apps, connected sensors or other new engagement technology” (Andrews, 2014, p. 26).

Yet most government websites fall short of pleasing their constituents. A survey by the Center for Digital Government in 2015 showed “only 18 percent of respondents agreed that their state is committed to better serving citizens online” (Raths, 2016, para. 5). And a different survey, by Vision Internet in 2014, showed only one-third of 334 local governments rated their websites as “highly effective” (Raths, 2016, para. 6). A 2017 study of county websites in New York State discovered more than half did not “provide citizens access to information about audits, contracts and lobbying activity and many fall well short of current best practices for government websites” (Leonard & Lahman, 2017, para. 4). Across the web in general, most sites fail at delivering the top two goals for homepages: delivering information and providing top-level navigation; one study showed only 39% of websites in 2013 had useful homepages, down from 45% of sites in 2001 (Nielsen, 2013). Another challenge is adapting an organization’s website to mobile technology, since many members of the public use only their smart phones, not desktop computers, to access government sites. The 2014 Adobe survey shows less than one-third of communicators working for government used mobile platforms to reach citizens, even though other research showed that 80% of people’s time is spent on mobile apps (Rosen, 2014).

To respond to citizen complaints and demands for technological advances, many cities are redesigning and investing in their websites. New York City recently grappled with redesign, adopting a new focus on responsive design for mobile device access, faster navigation to services, more engagement (especially through social media), and personalization (Shueh, 2015). Yet website designers and project managers for cities, often led by chief technology or information officers, are pushed in many different directions when reconstituting sites (Chadwick, 2011). Open data initiatives, responsive design, geographic information systems for mapping, and other new functional imperatives—all of which are placed under the large citizen engagement umbrella (Andrews, 2014; Fiorenza, 2014; Krzmarzick, 2013)—may push simpler but important initiatives to the sidelines, such as getting citizen input on budget issues through digital channels. Rivaling websites for attention are social media sites with 88% of local governments utilizing at least some official municipal social media platforms, such as Facebook, for public outreach (International City-County Management Association, 2014). A thirst for innovation and awards recognizing the best government sites may be the reasons behind the focus on technology, new functionality, and/or ornamentation (images over text), rather than audience access or real citizen involvement (Girardin, 2015; Raths, 2016). Chadwick (2011) reviews the literature that considers new technology’s effects on democracy and citizen engagement (which will be covered in the next section); he states that these theories are often influenced by narratives of progress and democratic ideals or norms. Chadwick calls for more qualitative research on engagement, especially studies that evaluate government variables through “transient periods of technological novelty” (2011, p. 35; see also Borins, 2008).

Citizen engagement

Citizen engagement serves as a byword for local government professionals and communicators at conferences hosted by the International City/County Management Association, the City-County Communication and Marketing Association, and the National Association of County Information Officers, among others. GovLoop, a national think tank for government workers, has offered no fewer than two dozen white papers on citizen engagement in the past three years. For this study, citizen engagement is defined as a public-sector entity “being available wherever citizens require a key interaction with or important information from government” (Krzmarzick, 2013, p. 3). Citizen engagement strategies are embedded in many cities’ strategic planning initiatives. The city of Pittsburgh (included in this study) recently published *ONE PGH: Pittsburgh’s resilience strategy* in February 2017. One of nine goals related to Pittsburgh’s place making and geography focused on communication to “increase social cohesion” and “connectivity” (Pittsburgh Department of City Planning, 2017, p. 53). More than a dozen strategies in the report’s action section focused on engagement with targeted communities within Pittsburgh and one strategy specifically addressed all “city government-to-citizen” communication (Pittsburgh Department of City Planning, 2017, p. 107). This strategy also included an upcoming website redesign.

Many discussions about better citizen engagement also focus on customer service. Examples of customer-service transactions provided to residents by cities include bill paying for utilities, trash and recycling collection, maintenance of streets and parks, building permits, library services, and the like. Calling the tension between customer service vs. citizen engagement a false distinction, Krzmarzick (2013) argues for a continuum metaphor. Instead, engagement can be at any moment when citizens encounter public sector agencies or government professionals. These moments build trust and collaboration, whether engagement occurs primarily for customer service reasons or for policy discussions; Krzmarzick believes all of these moments are equal and “vital to building a better society of informed and active citizens” (2013, p. 4). Another scholar rejects the customer vs. citizen dichotomy, saying that it “oversimplifies by ignoring other roles that the public plays relative to public management” (Thomas, 2013, p. 787). Thomas (2013) toggles among three distinct roles for publics: as citizens, as customers, and as partners, asserting these three as encompassing most interaction. When publics are constructed as customers, Thomas (2013) recommends customer guidelines that are focused on centralized systems for communication, including call centers and prominent websites, as well as mobile technology. When publics are partners, Thomas (2013) emphasizes social networks, which could involve social media and the use of influencers. When publics are viewed as citizens, Thomas (2013) recommends nurturing public involvement by inviting partnerships and eliciting information through a variety of techniques, with multiple opportunities for input, such as surveys and meetings. This three-part approach protects cities from overemphasizing the customer role, which leads people to evaluate government “according to what they receive” and

which diminishes government's relationships with citizens by obscuring aspects of public life "that extend beyond who gets what" (King & Nank, 2011, p. 6).

Other models may be useful to this discussion, including Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. For her, citizen participation means citizen power, "the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). This inclusion does not mean an "empty ritual of participation," but instead is marked by the top steps of a ladder leading to true citizen power: citizen control, delegated power, and partnership (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). Informing and consulting activities are placed within the category of tokenism on the ladder. This tokenism might be labeled as "steering" by advocates for a new public service model that focuses again on Arnstein's citizens, rather than on the "new public management" model that focuses on customers through efficient business practices (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2002, p. 553). This new public service model uses a "serve rather than steer" mantra as its focus, combining theories of citizenship, organizational humanism, and postmodernism to build a model in which "the role of government is transformed from one of controlling to one of agenda setting, bringing the proper players to the table and facilitating, negotiating, or brokering solutions to public problems" (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2002, p. 553). Scholars have updated Arnstein's ladder of participation, showing that the quality of government information directly affects how much citizens become engaged and trust the public sector (Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015). However, despite its ability to build trust, information sharing is viewed as a token activity in Arnstein's original model. Building trust must be a two-way enterprise, since public making is often in the hands of professional city managers, rather than elected officials. One participation study found although city governments possess the resources to build public-making digital spaces, those professional municipal managers "may devalue the informal know-how citizens have" if they access and participate in those spaces (Zheng, Schachter, & Holzer, 2014, p. 656). The same study found no correlation between technology and its usability, and higher digital engagement. The type of public making and engagement envisioned by these scholars places high demands not only on citizens, but also on city workers and officials, perhaps especially the communication teams that help to create web content and monitor social media sites (Lambiase & Bright, 2016).

Rhetoric, audiences and public making

Thomas' (2103) model for thinking of audiences as citizens, customers, and partners provides a useful framework for observing a city's engagement apparatus, developed for idealized audiences accessing information on websites. Thinking of these idealized categories while addressing real audiences, however, is not easy. This challenge carries complexity as communicators consider their rhetorical strategies for achieving engagement. On web pages, the organization and design of words and non-informational stimuli, such as photos and illustrations, have the power to influence attitudes and attract attention (Chadwick, 2011; Mitchell, 1986; Nielsen, 2013; Quinn, 2015; Ruhland, 2014; Schade, Cheng, & Sherugar, 2016). Stock photos,

photos without people, and generic slogans may pose problems for citizens because they may “come out of nowhere, with little connection to relevant stakeholders” (Zavattaro, 2013, p. 102). In addition to the arrangement of rhetorical strategies for reaching audiences, cities and their websites must also contend with perceptions held by 74% of U.S. citizens who believe elected officials do not care what citizens think (Smith, 2015), thus discouraging people from engagement.

However, once audience members enter public digital spaces for discussion, they may in turn become part of a public, or a “discourse community,” once their participation is activated (Lunsford & Ede, 2009, p. 47). These real audiences and publics have different characteristics, with an audience broadly defined to include any people who intend to view or listen to information or other content in traditional or digital spaces (Ede & Lunsford, 1985/1999). A public, on the other hand, is a more distinctive group of people who may be strangers to one another but have a collective purpose and the ability to articulate “the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1991, p. 176). The transformation from audience to public involves some tricky work since “a public is always in some state of crisis: it has to persistently call itself into being” (Ryder, 2009, p. 209). This public making, then, includes developing spaces for strangers to meet, which requires participants “to see some sense of mutual dependence, a belief that thinking with others can yield some positive outcome” (Ryder, 2011, p. 172). The public is full of strangers, of course, that the communicator will never meet personally; yet the communicator invokes a shared vision for the world that is shared with these strangers who are formed into a public or called into being by the “circulation of discourse” (Ryder, 2009, p. 210).

A public, then, relies on a disparate group of strangers to adopt an identity, to articulate to themselves their collective purpose, and to make them “believe that they are capable of making change” (Ryder, 2009, p. 210). For Ryder, this public making requires the communicator to be convincing in three ways. The first is proving the urgency of an issue, while the second is showing a particular way of viewing that issue (also known as framing in mass communication literature) or as public administration agenda setting by scholars such as Denhardt and Denhardt (2002). The third way that a communicator must be convincing—most important to the current study—is by urging the public that any specific solution to problems would require the participation of others, specifically them (Ryder, 2009).

Public-making rhetorical strategies, as outlined by Ryder (2009), parallel citizen engagement literature. One review of this literature and best practices urges municipal leaders to do public making in this way: to listen to issues that citizens find important; to make linkages not only between government and citizens, but among citizens themselves and other organizations or stakeholders; “to permit generation of information, consideration of alternatives, and joint action;” and to build civic capacity in new ways through new connections (Svara & Denhardt, 2010, p. 24). This positive outlook on the role of government in public making for citizen engagement has its counterparts. One counterpart raises concern about participation that is mechanized or synthetic, so that publics must fit themselves into limited space offered and “inhabit it according to pre-established rules” (Felt & Fochler, 2010, p. 220). Another concern is

technology's ability to offer the symmetry between city leaders and their publics, as described by Svava and Denhardt (2010), when invitational rhetoric may neither deliver equal relationships nor create an environment that builds respect and understanding (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Even in the best contexts, online public engagement may fail for many reasons: complex governmental structures and silos within those structures; technology outsourcing; miscommunication or cultural differences among teams; ambivalence; and fatigue (Chadwick, 2011).

Method

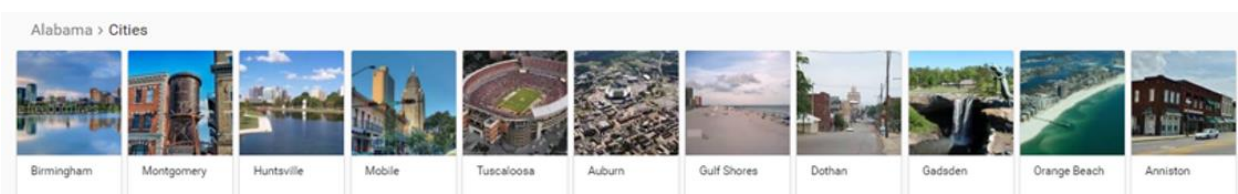
This study seeks to discover how public making occurs on municipal websites, which provide a way to see how cities address publics, invite participation, and create day-to-day spaces that build trust and may encourage and/or limit citizen engagement. Summative and qualitative content analyses were used to gather: 1) descriptive information about texts and images that make rhetorical appeals to publics; 2) numerical data; and 3) themes related to the ways city websites address customers, citizens, and partners. Summative content analysis, rather than purely quantitative content analysis, affords a more holistic analysis of texts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which for this study are municipal homepages. These findings and themes then will be analyzed within the overall context of current promises of interactive, mobile, and social media for municipal engagement, in order to pinpoint attributes of sites that do the rhetorical work of public making. Overall, this qualitative content analysis included these areas of analysis:

- Invitational rhetoric, such as ways feedback was elicited, resident or citizen involvement was encouraged, or digital town hall technology was promoted on a homepage;
- The settings of the main photos on homepages, images of city halls, and photos of face-to-face exchanges between citizens and officials;
- Contact information and other pathways for reaching elected officials or city departments;
- Signs of transparency, such as open data links, meeting notices, agendas, and videos of live or past meetings;
- The use of social media icons or links; and
- Open-ended space for notes, including ethnographic observations as well as rhetorical analysis of terms such as resident, citizen, community, and other names for users of the homepage.

Two hundred cities (see Appendix), four from each U.S. state, were selected in early 2017 using Google search. For example, the term "Cities in Alabama" returned a cascade of cities from Alabama, based on search popularity due in part to the sizes of cities (see Figure 1). This protocol ensured that larger cities were included for each state, since those city websites are used by many people. For each state's selection, the researcher used the first and second cities in the results, as well as No. 10 and No. 11 on the list. This protocol ensured inclusion of many mid-sized and smaller cities, but randomized selection of cities overall to add qualitative validity for

the selection. As can be seen in Figure 1, this system was used to select Birmingham, Montgomery, Orange Beach, and Anniston. To focus on Facebook pages and mobile capabilities, 50 large and smaller cities were chosen for a sub-group from the main 200-city group (see Appendix). Large and small cities from across the United States ensured that regional or state differences in municipal government structures and philosophies were represented.

Figure 1. How Google renders search results for “Cities in Alabama.”



Even though a coding sheet was used to categorize some homepage content for each of 200 cities, with tallies made for many of the categories above, the purpose of this rhetorical and qualitative content analyses is not to provide narrow and precise data only by category, nor to record the presence or absence of information alone. Instead, this mixed-method approach was developed to render broader descriptive information for the combination of images, photos, and text used by these sites upon first appearance for their users (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This focus is connected especially to public making in terms of the ways cities provide opportunities for viewers to see citizen engagement opportunities and/or text-based or photographic displays of municipal democracy at work. First to be gathered was descriptive information, along with content tallies from coding sheets, using an iterative approach among three trained analysts. Analysts worked through the ranges of themes and larger patterns to reach qualitative saturation, or when no new information emerged from the texts under study, providing another aid to validity and reliability for qualitative analysis (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000).

This mixed-method approach was built to provide answers to these research questions:

- Are these websites framed as one-way transactional sites or as interactive? In other words, are they for customers or for citizen /resident dialogue (or both, or neither)? In what ways are websites offering two-way, discussion-based dialogue about issues?
- In what ways are U.S. city websites reaching out to their publics? How are words such as resident, citizen, community, and visitor being deployed?
- How do the websites depict the reality of and concept of the town hall and the dialogue contained therein? What photos and images are used of city halls, and how often did these images appear on the homepages of U.S. cities?
- How easy is it for residents to find information to connect them to elected officials? To find city departments? To find city hall itself?
- What differences exist among large, medium, and small cities in this outreach?

More holistically, answers to these questions will lead to some understanding of this broader question: Are municipal websites doing the work of public making and encouraging citizen engagement on their homepages and in their cities?

Findings

The opening section of the findings will tackle the holistic question first: do municipal websites from this selection of 200 cities encourage citizen engagement and the work of public making? The answer to this question is a strong no, with a few outlier examples of websites created to be public-making spaces. These outliers have built electronic spaces to encourage citizen engagement channels and/or offer proof that city elected officials and departments are soliciting and listening to input. Although many sites offered plentiful contact points for customer services, when it came to citizen engagement, the opportunities were mostly absent. More striking from the selection of 200 municipal websites is the absence, or symbolic erasure, of citizen activities inside or outside of city hall that could be included in main photos, other representations, and/or images chosen for inclusion on homepages, which are first impressions for citizens, customers, visitors, and other users. Overall, this study found a small number of citizen engagement touchpoints of invitational rhetoric and a few examples of municipal listening. The analysis reveals cities are much better at creating outreach to customers than to citizens.

The next section will tackle the ways the cities excel in customer-serving functions, followed by a results section of the summative content analysis and rhetorical outreach by cities through text, photos, and dynamic digital content. Throughout the findings section, the word citizen will be used intentionally to denote the web-user-as-political-agent or member of a public as someone who holds opinions and has a role within a democratic municipal government. For the web-user-as-nonpolitical-agent, the words customer and resident will be used to mean a person being served by a municipal organization.

Lack of public-making touchpoints

Interactive public-making spaces were the exception and not the rule on these 200 city websites. Despite the hopes of the web's early innovators and current government technologists, these municipal websites feature very few touchpoints or digital spaces where substantial two-way discussion, listening by municipal leaders, and/or community give-and-take may occur within digital domains. The homepages did not rhetorically address users as citizens and all that the city-citizen relationship implies. Only eight of 200 city websites had direct links from their homepages to city-owned discussion spaces where issues could be discussed by citizens and where those citizens could follow the discussion of others about the same topic. In other words, these eight cities could be called extreme outliers by simply hosting links to public-making

spaces on their homepages. None of the seven largest cities—those with more than 1 million residents—offered links to city-owned discussion spaces from their homepages. Seven of the eight cities that did offer digital discussion spaces were either the first or second city listed in the Google results for their respective states, perhaps having more resources and tax dollars for development and management of digital discussions.

Six of the eight cities that did host citizen discussions did so through a third-party provider, while two hosted their own discussions, as follows:

- Portland, ME, Bel Air, MD, and Jackson, MS, used the CivicPlus platform, each with a prominent “Community Voice” link and microphone icon on the homepage;
- Salt Lake City, UT, with its “Open City Hall,” and Virginia Beach, VA, with its “Virtual Town Hall,” used a Peak Democracy platform;
- Pittsburgh, PA, used the MindMixer platform, with a small graphic titled “Engaged Pittsburgh” on its homepage;
- Kansas City, MO, offered a hyperlink to its own microsite called “KC Momentum,” which was a digital discussion board; and
- Worcester, MA, used a link and description to its own online crowd-sourcing site for sharing and commenting on ideas.

However, although links to these capabilities were present on all eight homepages, two were very difficult to find and did not publicize their public-making function to website visitors on first glance. Kansas City included a tiny hyperlink in the footer of its page, “KC Momentum,” which would be overlooked by most users because of size, placement, and ambiguity of the link wording. Pittsburgh’s “Engaged Pittsburgh” link was designed like an advertisement, and it was placed below 13 other city advertisements, one offering a link to “Reserve a facility online.” In this way, renting facilities to residents trumped a public-making function on the page, and both were contained in the same rhetorical wrapping, that of an advertisement, which viewers often overlook. This framework for web pages was common, with emphasis given to customer functionality, since viewers were visually and textually guided to customer choices, rather than public-making spaces for engagement. However, these interactive discussion spaces, although sometimes difficult to find, are important to the prototyping needed to establish whether digital public making could become a vital tool for cities. To facilitate citizen control, delegated power, and partnership envisioned by Arnstein’s (1969) ladder model, or the new public service model espoused by Denhardt and Denhardt (2002), cities must experiment with new ways to include and listen to stakeholders of all kinds, through as many channels as needed.

Only three cities—Worcester, Salt Lake City, and Virginia Beach—included full-bodied descriptions on their homepages about these digital discussion areas, making it more likely for citizens to understand the purpose and to click through. A few cities outside this group of eight, such as Montgomery, AL, or St. Petersburg, FL, included a homepage link to a “digital strategy” site or “action center” featuring open data sets or static information. Newport, RI, with its main site created by Vision Internet, offered a link called “Engage Newport” to a microsite where residents could research and report ideas, but not participate in interactive discussions of issues.

However, this feature was an important example, because of its rarity, of the ways a city could call audience members into roles as a public. Although in Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, information sharing is seen as a token activity, it is a small step toward trust and a basic requirement of democracy and transparency.

Other public-making efforts on websites occurred in several ways, including invitations to citizens to get involved in city governance, to attend meetings, and to interact with officials in other ways, including phone or email contact. At least a dozen cities had homepage links for citizens to apply for municipal boards or commissions. A few offered links to forms for citizens to share an idea, to citizen surveys, or to invitations for coffee with the mayor or to in-person town hall meetings. If citizens wanted to visit their bricks-and-mortar city halls for face-to-face engagement, they might not be able to find the address on a city homepage if they were new residents or unfamiliar with these 200 cities. Seventy-three cities did not list the physical addresses of their city halls on the homepage; if cities did include an address, it was most often found in the footer of the homepage, often without a telephone number. Of the 51 cities in the overall group with populations above 250,000, 31 did not list a physical address for city hall, yet those larger cities would be the most likely to have existing and new residents who would not know the physical location of city hall. A few cities listed only P.O. Box numbers, without a physical address, which seems useless to most citizens, except for bill paying. One site prominently listed its city hall operation hours, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., but did not include a physical address or phone number. If citizens wanted to contact elected officials directly, only 10 city sites included that information on the homepage itself; otherwise, citizens had to click once for that information on 115 other homepages, and 75 homepages had navigation pathways that forced citizens to click two or more times to reach either an email address or phone number for elected officials. Overall, citizens living in more than half of these cities would have to work hard on these websites to contribute ideas, to find ways to get involved in governance, and to locate physical addresses and contact information for elected officials.

Better information was available for citizens to get involved in common city events. At least one example of an upcoming city event, council meeting, or community gathering for residents to attend was found on 177 city homepages. Cities also occasionally offered agendas, live streaming, video recordings, and minutes of council meetings, along with bidding and Request for Proposal opportunities for businesses. At least five had links to apply for citizen academies or citizen police academies. Less available were opportunities for offering feedback or reports on potholes, snow removal, or other city issues/services, with just 75 cities out of 200 offering these report or share links on homepages. Social media sites have capabilities for community discussions, too, and 170 cities, including all eight cities mentioned above, offered at least one social media icon or link on their homepages.

Customer-service touchpoints

Although nearly all city homepages lacked public-making spaces and any in-depth citizen engagement capabilities, these sites did a better job addressing users as customers by offering digital customer services or e-services. Many sites offered online bill paying or other e-services, and 129 sites offered one- or two-click access to departments or city employees. The range of customer services was broad, with links to sign-ups for text alerts and city newsletters, as well as tax information, snow-removal schedules, transportation schedules, city permitting information, open data initiatives, and Geographic Information Systems maps. The largest cities tended to have multiple links to online services.

Seventy-two cities had menus labeled residents, where lists of services and/or departments appeared, with only a handful of cities using the term citizen anywhere on the page. Menus for visitors or community were also prevalent. Only the homepage for Oshkosh, WI, included a section heading using the term citizen for citizen input, leading to an online reporting form for ideas and complaints. Resident is a more inclusive term, which may explain its prevalence, and the word citizen has become problematic in the context of municipal government because of the sanctuary cities debate during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. (Several larger cities in this study, including Pittsburgh and Los Angeles, had support information on their homepages for immigrants.) However, the common absence of the word citizen from menus, headings, or links is notable. Four cities in the group of 200 have won awards or have been finalists in Government Technology's Best of the Web Awards—Long Beach, CA, Denver, CO, Fort Lauderdale, FL, and Louisville, KY—and none included the words citizen or city hall on their homepages. None of these four cities offered public-making strategies or provided links to digital discussion forums. Quite simply, citizens were not addressed through these award winners and many other homepages.

Lack of symbolic representations of city hall and citizens engaging

Qualitative content analysis on each homepage also focused on the most prominent or largest photo or image (at the top of a homepage, or the first photo in a slider near the top). One of three types of main photos was used by more than half of the 200 cities in the group:

- A photo of downtown skyline or street scene without people (38);
- A photo of another landmark without people (34); and
- A nature photo without people, such as a flower, tree, snowy forest, or field (34).

How many times was a photo of the exterior of city hall included as a city's main image for its homepage? Just 16 cities out of 200 used such a prominent photo, all of them without people in the scene. Although there were photos of downtown with people (3) and landmarks with people (1), as well as nature photos of specific places that may have included people (7), not one city included a main photo of people gathering near or entering/exiting city hall. In fact, just one-

fourth (51) of the homepages included any photo of city hall (including the 16 that used them as main images). Twenty-nine of those 51 city hall images were contained within sliders (a carousel of photos in which photos slide by and change) and less likely to be seen because users do not wait to see all photos or because of banner blindness, which is caused when photo spaces look like advertisements and are ignored (Ruhland, 2014). Joining the few depictions of city hall were few depictions of people in general: fewer than one-fifth of 200 photos included people at all.

This analysis also sought any photos—both main photos and any others on the homepages—depicting citizens participating in democracy building or engagement activities. These context-bound photos of citizen interactions were defined as containing any visible symbols of people meeting in or near city facilities, or with city leaders in the community, or with words/captions representing any town hall-like meeting, focus group, or an elected official’s meet-and-greet. Only 16 city websites contained such depictions. The median number of photos on these 200 municipal homepages was six, and the median number of graphical images was also six, for an average of about 12 photos/images on each site. In all, these cities selected and displayed more than 1,244 photos across 200 homepages, not counting other images (maps, graphics, fliers). Only 16 showed citizens, engaging. This means that cities are missing opportunities to feature invitational rhetoric, or public-making images on their sites, as encouragement to audiences to become part of a public. Few photos of city halls join the lack of digital access to city decision-makers as a deterrent to participation.

Three other patterns from the city homepages, social media, and mobile sites included: technology and design, partnerships, and social media engagement.

Technology and design

Although most of these municipal sites contained valuable information, design of many homepages was based on city structures and organizational charts, rather than users’ ability to find needed information; this is still one of the most common mistakes of web design (Schade, Cheng, & Sherugar, 2016). Many cities emphasized only services, based on a laundry list of city departments, and ignored or shortchanged soft, boundary-spanning engagement activities. In addition, sliders, which may look like advertising or hide valuable information, were used on 125 of the homepages (Ruhland, 2014).

In the sub-group of 50 cities (see Appendix), 14 did not have responsive design. Of the 36 cities using responsive design, five were poorly executed and difficult to use. Two of these 50 cities offered city apps, when the web pages were accessed by smart phone. These cities without good digital access decrease engagement opportunities and limit the public making possibilities for their residents and citizens.

Partnerships

Occasionally, homepages promoted partnerships with local organizations, schools, convention and visitors' bureaus, chambers of commerce, and neighborhood groups by including those logos as hyperlinks in the footer of the page. A few sites solicited openly for volunteers for city activities. In these ways, some cities fulfilled outreach envisioned by the citizen-customer-partner model for engagement (Thomas, 2013). One such city, Cedar Falls, IA, placed a spotlight on the convention and visitors bureau, a Blue Zones¹ project, and a downtown business-development group.

Social media engagement

From the 200 cities in the group, 170 featured at least one social media icon or link on their homepages. In the sub-group of 50 cities (see Appendix), 44 had verified or official-seeming Facebook pages. Forty-three had made postings within the last month of the analysis, and all 44 city accounts allowed user comments. For profile photos, 33 of 44 used city logos or seals, and three used photos of city halls. In the larger cover photos on these 44 Facebook pages, nine used photos of downtown areas without people, eight used photos of city halls (six without people), and six used photos of other landmarks without people. Seven used various photos of residents or city leadership. Only one of 44 cover photos for these Facebook pages depicted citizens in action. Again, the visual rhetoric on these social media sites was not invitational, but merely decorative.

Discussion and conclusions

Designing useful websites is difficult, and municipalities face different expectations than most organizations. City administrators know that a web visit may be the only time a citizen connects with local government, and that the experience should be easy (Wood, Knell, Pittman, Newcombe, Eidam, McCauley, & Mulholland, 2016). General user-engagement studies show website navigation, graphical representation, and organization were often found lacking (Garett, Chiu, Zhang, & Young, 2016), and these municipal homepages were no exception. Organization on these homepages was usually based on city structures and on services residents might need to access, rather than on creating public-making spaces for citizen engagement. The best municipal sites should address both public-making and service functions, providing more emphasis on the former, and more intuitive access to the latter. If cities place customers and citizens on the same continuum, addressing both audiences sufficiently, then all touchpoints can make a difference to

¹ Blue Zones refers to cities where people live longer and better (<https://www.bluezones.com/>).

audience perceptions (Krzmarzick, 2013). Digital engagement platforms must first be developed and tested and then should be emphasized on homepages. This public making requires municipalities to offer communication channels that are two-way as well as multi-dimensional. All participants need access to the viewpoints of others.

Before these public-making platforms can be developed, however, city administrators and elected officials must make a commitment to support and use digital citizen engagement, in addition to face-to-face meetings. In a survey, municipal administrators admitted information mostly flows from cities to citizens, and only rarely from citizens to local government, which they estimated to be under 5% of the time; only one-fourth of these city leaders used formal plans for digital participation (International City-County Management Association, 2011). When one-way information campaigns and customer service become normalized as the only ways cities do business, then local governments run the risk of becoming public relations and marketing agencies, “*sans substance*” (Zavattaro, 2013, p. 17). Unfortunately, this study confirms that one-way communication, rather than citizen engagement, is the norm. Since only eight cities offered links on their homepages to citizen discussion platforms, and fewer than half of the 200 offered feedback/report links on homepages, it is hard not to conclude that cities are closed organisms in digital spaces, which could and should provide the easiest and most accessible platforms for citizens. Even though 170 cities in the study provided links to social media sites, where some community discussions are certainly possible, these forums are not in city spaces and may not be conducive to collaborative, productive exchange. Unlike the eight cities that have made the investment in their own digital discussion platforms, many social media platforms are streams of unmoderated, unguided venting, sharing, and information overload. The expectation of city leadership’s being accountable for broad social media discussions across many platforms is also certainly lower.

Another disappointing reality of these 200 homepages is the visual erasure of representations of people, especially citizens. Citizens in action were absent except in 16 photos, some of them small in size or less emphasized than main photos. About 40 main photos on these municipal websites did include people, but 160 did not. That means the most valuable real estate on these pages was given to sterile landmark photos, downtown skylines, or generic nature shots that could be in any state or city. These sterile visual representations send a clear message to their viewers about public making and engagement by erasing people and signs of their participation. Instead, this prime real estate on websites should be used to call audiences of citizens, customers, and partners into being, to convince them that they and their opinions matter, and that they should participate in their communities. Using photos of citizen engagement would be particularly important, since only 16 out of more than 1,200 photos on these 200 homepages showed citizens working at engagement. Using photos of city hall itself should also be a priority for each city, rather than generic skylines or nature photos. If people do not see these houses of local democracy or collaborative activities in their communities and on their cities’ homepages, how are they to learn about democratic participation? National events after the U.S. 2016 presidential election have shaped congressional town-hall meetings into protests and shouting

matches. Should not local governments, even more than other levels of government, strive to showcase more productive two-way communication experiences and channels? And should not those images, messages, and participatory culture be showcased on a city's digital front porch?

One of the best places for exchange and communication to occur—and to be seen by citizens—is the municipal website, with well-designed homepages and mobile apps that invite participation. Following the strategic communication profession's renewed focus and research into consumer experience, cities should embark on citizen experience studies related to their digital spaces, as much or more than they attend to customer service. It is clear from more than a decade of research and case studies that digital citizen engagement must comprise interactions among citizens, public managers, and elected officials who are open to sharing authority and who are clearly communicating constraints and options to be considered.

In addition, a single dedicated citizen-engagement page should be hosted by city websites, with links to the following elements gathered conveniently in one digital place: real-time digital discussion forums; ongoing citizen surveys and resident polling; calendars of upcoming meetings with agendas; minutes and videos of past meetings; social media platforms with current city news; open-data sets; report-a-problem links; a directory with phone numbers, email addresses, and office locations for city elected officials and department leadership; events calendars; customer-service information; and more. Having a coordinated digital strategy nurtured by city leadership must be a priority. Though difficult, cities “must be willing to go the distance no matter the outcome” for the best digital engagement (Desouza & Smith, 2014, para. 40) through both public-making and customer-focused services. Anything less means the promise of a real digital commons for citizen participation remains unfulfilled.

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Appendix

List of 200 cities in study, in order of Google search rankings by state.

CITY	STATE	CITY	STATE	CITY	STATE	CITY	STATE	CITY	STATE
ANCHORAGE	AK	HAWAII*	HI	DETROIT*	MI	CARLSBAD*	NM	HOUSTON	TX
JUNEAU	AK	KAWAII	HI	GRAND RAPIDS	MI	GALLUP	NM	DALLAS	TX
NORTH POLE*	AK	DES MOINES	IA	LIVONIA	MI	LAS VEGAS	NV	GALVESTON*	TX
UTQIAGVIK	AK	IOWA CITY	IA	SOUTHFIELD	MI	RENO	NV	LUBBOCK	TX
BIRMINGHAM*	AL	SIOUX CITY*	IA	MINNEAPOLIS	MN	MESQUITE*	NV	SALT LAKE*	UT
MONTGOMERY	AL	CEDAR FALLS	IA	ST PAUL	MN	WINNEMUCCA	NV	PROVO	UT
ORANGE BEACH	AL	BOISE*	ID	BURNSVILLE*	MN	NEW YORK CITY*	NY	DRAPER	UT
ANNISTON	AL	COEUR D ALENE	ID	MAPLE GROVE	MN	BUFFALO	NY	WEST VALLEY CITY	UT
LITTLE ROCK	AR	LEWISTON	ID	ST LOUIS	MO	BINGHAMPTON	NY	RICHMOND*	VA
FAYETTEVILLE	AR	EAGLE	ID	KANSAS CITY	MO	WHITE PLAINS	NY	VIRGINIA BEACH	VA
SPRINGDALE*	AR	CHICAGO	IL	LEE'S SUMMIT*	MO	CLEVELAND	OH	HAMPTON	VA
PINE BLUFF	AR	SPRINGFIELD	IL	ST JOSEPH	MO	COLUMBUS	OH	NEWPORT NEWS	VA
PHOENIX*	AZ	JOLIET*	IL	JACKSON*	MS	CHILLICOTHE*	OH	BURLINGTON	VT
TUCSON	AZ	ELGIN	IL	BILOXI	MS	MASSILLOU	OH	MONTPELIER	VT
GLENDALE	AZ	INDIANAPOLIS*	IN	NATCHEZ	MS	OKLAHOMA CITY*	OK	BARRE CITY*	VT
PRESCOTT	AZ	FT WAYNE	IN	OCEAN SPRINGS	MS	TULSA	OK	ESSEX	VT
LOS ANGELES*	CA	MUNCIE	IN	MISSOULA*	MT	ENID	OK	SEATTLE	WA
SAN FRANCISCO	CA	FISHERS	IN	BILLINGS	MT	OWASSO	OK	TACOMA	WA
PALM SPRINGS	CA	WICHITA*	KS	MILES CITY	MT	PORTLAND	OR	RENTON*	WA
LONG BEACH	CA	KANSAS CITY	KS	HAVRE	MT	EUGENE	OR	PULLAYUP	WA
DENVER	CO	HUTCHINSON	KS	CHARLOTTE	NC	LK. OSWEGO*	OR	MILWAUKEE	WI
COLORADO SPRINGS	CO	DODGE CITY	KS	RALEIGH	NC	GRESHAM	OR	MADISON	WI
GRAND JUNCTION*	CO	LOUISVILLE	KY	CARY*	NC	PHILADELPHIA*	PA	RACINE*	WI
DURANGO	CO	LEXINGTON	KY	HIGH POINT	NC	PITTSBURGH	PA	OSHKOSH	WI
HARTFORD	CT	HOPKINSVILLE*	KY	FARGO*	ND	WILKES BARRE	PA	CHARLESTON*	WV
NEW HAVEN	CT	BEREA	KY	BISMARCK	ND	CARLISLE	PA	MORGANTOWN	WV
WEST HARTFORD*	CT	NEW ORLEANS*	LA	BOTTINEAU	ND	PROVIDENCE	RI	HARPERS FERRY	WV
MILFORD	CT	BATON ROUGE	LA	MEDORA	ND	NEWPORT	RI	PRINCETON	WV
WILMINGTON*	DE	COVINGTON	LA	OMAHA*	NE	EAST GREENWICH*	RI	CHEYENNE*	WY
NEWARK	DE	KENNER	LA	LINCOLN	NE	CUMBERLAND	RI	JACKSON	WY
SMYRNA	DE	BOSTON	MA	NEBRASKA CITY	NE	CHARLESTON*	SC	LANDER	WY
MILLSBORO	DE	WORCHESTER	MA	CHADRON	NE	COLUMBIA	SC	RAWLINS	WY
MIAMI	FL	SOMERVILLE*	MA	MANCHESTER*	NH	SUMMERVILLE	SC		
FT LAUDERDALE	FL	AMHERST	MA	CONCORD	NH	ANDERSON	SC		
ST PETERSBURG*	FL	BALTIMORE*	MD	EXETER	NH	SIOUX FALLS	SD		
NAPLES	FL	ANNAPOLIS	MD	LEBANON	NH	RAPID CITY	SD		
ATLANTA*	GA	BOWIE	MD	NEWARK	NJ	DEADWOOD*	SD		
SAVANNAH	GA	BEL AIR	MD	JERSEY CITY	NJ	MITCHELL	SD		
LAWRENCEVILLE	GA	PORTLAND	ME	MONTCLAIR	NJ	NASHVILLE*	TN		
KENNESAW	GA	BANGOR	ME	CAMDEN*	NJ	MEMPHIS	TN		
HONOLULU	HI	ORONO*	ME	ALBUQUERQUE	NM	SEVIERVILLE	TN		
MAUI	HI	KENNEBUNKPORT	ME	SANTA FE	NM	KINGSPORT	TN		

*Denotes city is also in sub-group of 50 for mobile and Facebook analysis.