

## Benefits of Online Media in Community Development and Community Engagement

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**Abstract:** Online media serves as relevant tools for understanding a community and mobilizing community members for health, education and business promotion activities. New research literature has brought increased attention to the role that social media networks can play in community development and engagement. The emergence of electronic online media has diversified the ways in which community can be formed and engaged. In this study, we looked at how online media tools such as social networks can be harnessed for community development while maintaining synergy between community development experts and community members as well as among community members. Social media and networking while having challenges can also provide a relatively simple, free and ubiquitous method of communicating, sharing of information and involvement of a diverse constituency in community development efforts. Continued work in this area must progress to ensure these tools remain easy to use and understandable to community development experts. The use of online media has great potential to transform community development discipline in ways that are likely unanticipated.

**Key words:** Community development, community engagement, social media, social network, online media, discipline

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### INTRODUCTION

The tools of electronic online media such as Facebook and Twitter can be used to track, support, create and mobilize social networks necessary for community development. These tools have significant potential to enhance community engagement efforts in developing communities (Fine, 2006). Social media venues have undergone a significant shift to greater bidirectional or multidirectional communication in recent years (Bacon, 2009). In addition, social media tools provide new forums to raise issues, facilitate the exchange of ideas and engage a larger community. The term “media” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the main means of mass communication which includes broadcasting, publishing and the internet regarded collectively (Anonymous, 2009). However, now a days media is often used as a synonym to mass media and news media. Media, along with everything else in this world has evolved a lot and when the internet was introduced, media fitted perfectly in it, giving birth to online media. Today, online media is one of the top news sources, bringing the news to a huge audience thereby expressing

its prowess and potentials for community development. Online media has many representations, such as forums, blogs, image galleries and video portals (Anonymous, 2019).

Online media tools provide a newly emerging mechanism for engaging a large and diverse group of participants, including individuals and groups that might otherwise be hard to reach or to bring together, such as individuals with a rare disease (Bacon, 2009; Fine, 2006). Online media also provide a forum for discussion that has important differences from face-to-face interactions. With online media tools such as Facebook, Tweeter and YouTube, all participants have an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Online media also provide opportunities to reframe questions as the discussion evolves (Connor, 2009). In addition, online media can generate a discussion archive that is useful for revisiting opinions, information and collective history. Generally, depending on how groups communicate, a broader group of participants can be engaged using online media than through traditional means. This facilitates the process of establishing collective positions and strategies. Specifically, online media can provide a forum for

interaction and discussion about both draft and final position statements. Online media can also play an important role in building and sustaining networks by facilitating ongoing communication, social exchange and coordination of activities in communities and between communities. Moreover, these media can help build trust by providing venues in which community members can demonstrate transparency and openness. Meeting agendas, minutes, handouts as well as questions and responses can all be posted and viewed. Online media can be a tool for mobilizing community organizations and community members and can help sustain engagement and commitment. Online media can also offer accessible sites to provide information about developing engagement such as its purpose and goals and who is involved (Bacon, 2009; Connor, 2009). In this study, we looked at how online media tools such as social networks can be harnessed for community development while maintaining synergy between community development experts and community members as well as among community members.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study adopted the review of literature methodology to provide a short perspective on how online media tools can be harnessed for community development while maintaining synergy between community development experts and community members as well as among community members.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Community development:** Community development is understood as a professional discipline and is defined by the International Association for Community Development ([www.iacdglobal.org](http://www.iacdglobal.org)) and the global network of community development practitioners and scholars as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organization, education and empowerment of people within their communities whether these be of locality, identity or interest in urban and rural setting (Anonymous, 2017). Bowen *et al.* (2010) contends that community development seeks to empower individuals and groups of people with the skills they need to effect change within their communities. These skills are often created through the formation of social groups working for a common agenda. Community developers must understand both how to work with individuals and how to affect

communities' positions within the context of larger social institutions (Bowen *et al.*, 2010). The United Nations defines community development broadly as a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. The United Nations Terminology Database (UNTERM) and the International Association for Community Development (IACD) defines community development as both a practice-based profession and an academic discipline (Anonymous, 2017). The IACD definition has been adopted by community development professionals as international standards for community development practice. According to IACD, the values and ethos that should underpin practice are as follows: commitment to rights, solidarity, democracy, equality, environmental and social justice. The purpose of community development is understood by IACD as being to work with communities to achieve participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice (Anonymous, 2017). This practice is carried out by people in different roles and contexts including people explicitly called professional community workers and people taking on essentially the same role but with a different job title, together with professionals in other occupations ranging from social work, adult education, youth work, health disciplines, environmental education, local economic development, to urban planning, regeneration, architecture and more who seek to apply community development values and adopt community development methods. Community development practice also encompasses a range of occupational settings and levels from development roles working with communities, through to managerial and strategic community planning roles.

**Community engagement:** Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. Community engagement is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. Community engagement often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs and practices (Stoecker, 1997).

Community engagement is therefore, a strategic process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people whether they are connected

by geographic location, special interest or affiliation to identify and address issues affecting their well-being. The linking of the term 'community' to 'engagement' serves to broaden the scope, shifting the focus from the individual to the collective with the associated implications for inclusiveness to ensure consideration is made of the diversity that exists within any community (Anonymous, 2019).

Many local authorities also define community engagement in the context of planning and decision making. Latrobe city has defined community engagement as a broad term that covers the interactions between Council, Latrobe city communities (which could be towns or other locations or groups of people with a common interest or identity) and other stakeholders (Anonymous, 2015). Community engagement allows community members to actively contribute to Council decisions and actions by creating an inclusive environment in which community feedback is embraced, considered and acted upon. It serves as a response to increasing community concern about low levels of trust and confidence in government and addresses the escalating expectation that all levels of government be responsive to the community, accountable for levels of

service and spending. Community engagement is also about engaging with our community to provide access to a greater range of solutions. The collective wisdom of the community can help Council to achieve the vision and aspirations of our community.

**Online media for community engagement:** The presentation about using online media for community engagement was first delivered as part of the right click event in Perth back in September, 2010. The presentation was subtitled, "50 online tools and methodologies for community engagement" and was divided into seven sections dealing with social media methods for: information, sharing, feedback, consultation, involvement, collaboration, empowerment and monitoring. The importance of social media in community engagement according to Lavery *et al.* (2010) cannot be over emphasized as it stands critical for community development. For the purpose of this study, we shall limit the exploration of these benefits in view of community development to business, education and health (Lavery *et al.*, 2010) (Fig. 1).

**Using online media for developing community member's businesses:** Majority of consumer experiences begins and



Fig. 1: Community development engagement

takes place on online media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. These small gestures actually raise awareness about businesses in customer's social network. Irrespective of the business one does, a visual accompanied by a personal customer testimony is significant in terms of engagement with current and potential customers. Online media also provides another bonus, a more personal interaction. The newsfeed on Facebook has been upgraded in 2017 to include videos and thus has changed the face of paid social advertising. When a customer "likes" something you've posted, it will appear to their greater network, allowing your business to appear to a wider audience. Furthermore, the items that you post on your own feed whether it's a picture or a video can be easily shared and distributed amongst various networks. This cultivated "social media identity" gives your business the opportunity to engage with people far beyond any traditional form of advertising. If people have questions, messages on Facebook are much faster than a toll-free phone call or an email form. One survey shows that consumers expect 0-4 h for a response while most traditional business models take up to 10 h on average. With social engagement, comments, feedback and reviews are more easily addressed on Facebook. When you respond more quickly to a customer's feedback, rather than send an automated message, this increases your level of engagement and cultivates an overall experience that is more personal (Anonymous, 2018).

**Using online media for facilitating community member's access to education:** Online media tools are also effective ways to increase community member's engagement. As the social features of online media resources have attracted the attention of millions of people around the globe, these same features are also capable of drawing the attention of community members to the learning opportunities provided by educational institutions (Rutherford, 2012). A community member who hardly ever participates in learning sessions may get actively engaged in co-constructing his learning experience with his community development specialist, collaborating with his fellow colleagues and may feel more comfortable to express himself and to share his resources and ideas on Facebook, Twitter or YouTube (McLoughlin and Lee, 2007). Using tools such as Google Apps. for such Education or Ning would enable community members to have access to valuable learning resources regardless of time and place. Within the traditional setting, providing community members with additional learning materials can be very expensive and logistically complicated. However, using social media can enhance the learning experience.

In fact, inviting community members to participate in the different learning activities available on social learning platforms would serve to support community engagement by extending the amount of time a community member spends in doing his tasks and projects (Rutherford, 2010). Moreover, given that many community members often complain of getting bored or intimidated at conventions and gatherings, the dynamic and participatory nature of many social media resources could be used to engage or re-engage bored or shy community members.

Another vital benefit of online media is that they foster collaboration. Collaboration means working together jointly, intellectually and socially to achieve common goals. Within an online learning community, collaboration refers to any instructional method in which community members work together in groups towards a common goal (Mattessich *et al.*, 2001). As such, collaborative learning can be viewed as encompassing all group-based instructional methods including cooperative learning. Ingram and Hathorn (2004), true collaboration consists of three critical elements: participation, interaction and synthesis. This means that collaboration in educational settings requires that students move beyond merely dividing up assignments. True collaboration is not only asking community members to independently produce separate parts of a project, it actually means working together on shared tasks. In this respect, Prince (2004) claimed that the core element of collaborative learning is that emphasis is on community member interactions rather than on learning as a solitary activity. Given the importance of collaboration in the learning process, a great number of online media tools serve as platforms for learners to gather and share information and resources from both Internal and external collaboration networks. Online learners, who could be community members, community development experts or any other individual in the community can thus, generate their own learning content and take. Those involved in community development would do well to become familiar with various opportunities to address the challenges outlined above in a coordinated effort and seek new and innovative methods to use and apply social media and networking tools to transform the discipline in the future (Lachapelle, 2011).

**Using online media for improving community member's health:** The online media is beneficial for community engagement in health promotion activities aimed at improving community member's health and well-being. The following key points are used to buttress the place of online media in ensuring better health for community members.

**Establish positions and strategies:** Social networks represent important groups of constituents in any community health planning initiative. These groups can be engaged to provide feedback, identify priorities and opportunities, establish positions on issues and approaches and plan strategies for intervention. Both obtaining knowledge about social networks and gathering knowledge from such networks are essential to the development of relevant strategies for health improvement. In addition, social networks are means of communication, creating a platform for sharing and discussing potential positions and strategies.

**Build and sustain networks:** Building and sustaining networks of individuals and entities for community health improvement or research includes establishing and maintaining communication channels, exchanging resources and coordinating collaborative activities. Existing social networks can be effective and efficient platforms for efforts in community engagement if, they reach people who are central to these efforts and if their members share the goals of the engagement, efforts. Through the community engagement process, new networks can be developed as well.

**Mobilize constituencies:** Ultimately, partners and their constituencies must be mobilized to take the actions that will lead to improved community health and mobilization must be sustained through leadership, communication and motivation. This is where the social capital embedded in social networks is of the utmost importance throughout the community development process.

## CONCLUSION

Online media tools such as social networks can be harnessed for community development while maintaining synergy between community development experts and community members as well as among community members. The use of social media and networking can conform to and even complement the principles of community development society. The use of these tools has the potential to promote the fundamental tenets of the society and influence how practitioners act and interact in the future. Social media and networking while having challenges can also provide a relatively simple, free and ubiquitous method of communicating, sharing of information and involvement of a diverse constituency in community development efforts. Continued work in this area must progress to ensure these tools remain easy to

use and understandable to practitioners. Last, the use of these tools has great potential to transform the community development discipline in ways that are likely unanticipated.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers deeply appreciate the effort of B.C. Nwefuru in proofreading this article.

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