

Chapter 11

Digital Civic Participation in Australian Local Governments: Everyday Practices and Opportunities for Engagement

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Abstract Digital technologies and social media platforms are changing civic expectations surrounding interaction with government. Local governments hold key positions in the development of digital spaces for civic participation in the issues that directly impact citizens' everyday lives. However, local practices largely prioritise information and services over reciprocal dialogue with citizens. This chapter explores digital civic engagement in Australian local governments. It draws from a nation-wide survey of councils' digital practices to highlight that opportunities for civic participation are increasing, particularly through social media. However, substantial discrepancies exist between the digital practices of rural and urban local governments. This discrepancy is further examined through comments from seven rural councils that participated in a workshop on digital engagement, and the views of urban citizens (through focus groups) whose local government offers advanced digital practices. For the rural authorities, key challenges to digital development include limited connectivity, capacity, and financial resources, as well as the different expectations that citizens have in relation to social media use. For the (urban) citizens, participation in online spaces has gone unanswered by their government, which is creating a sense of disenfranchisement. While there is evidence of innovation in Australian digital local government, civic demand and government use largely fail to align. Councils need to reconceptualise current approaches to digital engagement by considering the purpose of participatory spaces and integrating their use into everyday operations. Moreover, greater government receptivity and responsiveness is required to enable civic participation to inform local decision-making. Such involvement allows citizens to develop a sense of connection with local government and facilitates increased civic engagement.

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11.1 Introduction

In an era when user-generated content, viral marketing, and googling are normalised, government communication needs to be redefined to suit the digital environment. Digital government applications are encouraged and endorsed as promoting open and accessible governments that facilitate direct citizen connection with representatives, increase transparency, and enable more deliberative and participatory democratic systems (see, for example, Coleman and Blumler 2009; Bertot et al. 2012). The reality, however, often demonstrates government reluctance to cede control of online communication, resulting in the implementation of digital government strategies that privilege one-way communication between governments and citizens over opportunities for two-way civic engagement (Jimenez et al. 2012; Bekkers and Homburg 2007).

The rapid proliferation of digital media into individuals' everyday lives has changed civic expectations surrounding digital interaction with government and created increasing demand for new forms of political participation (Jaeger and Bertot 2010; Holland 2014). Governments have the opportunity to respond to changing civic expectations by incorporating social media and other platforms for two-way consultation into their communicative practices. When used as everyday mechanisms for civic engagement, digital technologies can provide avenues for improved connections between governments and citizens (Mossberger et al. 2013). This chapter argues that local government use of social media and other participatory spaces must extend beyond improved access to information and services to enable citizens to actively engage in the communication flows and decision-making processes that directly relate to their lives and locales. In order to achieve this, receptivity and responsiveness need to be incorporated into ongoing government avenues for digital civic participation (Macnamara 2013).

This chapter draws from findings from a nation-wide survey of 559 Australian local governments' digital practices. It highlights that avenues for online citizen participation are increasing, particularly through social media. However, there are considerable discrepancies between the digital practices employed by smaller rural local governments and those implemented by larger urban authorities that have improved connectivity and more substantial resources. As such, this chapter draws from the views of rural local governments that govern small and geographically dispersed communities to demonstrate the disadvantages they face in relation to connectivity and capacity in the digital media environment. It furthermore outlines insights from citizens from a metropolitan municipality that has employed advanced digital practices. Their comments suggest that current digital engagement opportunities are largely tokenistic gestures that do little to aid civic connection with government.

11.2 Social Media and Civic Engagement in Digital Local Government

The prevalence of digital technologies in citizens' everyday lives is redefining understandings and practices associated with democratic participation. Digital initiatives allow governments to address increasing demand for political involvement through new methods of civic engagement. In particular, as social media have become embedded within society (Meikle and Young 2012), platforms such as Twitter and Facebook offer opportunities to supplement existing interactions between citizens and governments with additional spaces for reciprocal conversations (Ellison and Hardey 2013; Mossberger et al. 2013; Hofmann et al. 2013). Such government-led spaces through social media commonly follow typologies of maturity with stages including: one-way information dissemination and increased data transparency; improved service delivery; and soliciting public input into decision-making to enable more open government through collaboration with citizens and other stakeholders to co-create solutions for complex problems (Lee and Kwak 2012; Bonsón et al. 2012; Chun et al. 2010).

Similar to early models of e-government development (Moon 2002; Thomas 2004), progression through these stages of social media use is often viewed as a linear process with governments initially providing increased access to information before offering new avenues for services and then slowly enabling increased interaction and civic participation. However, when considering that e-government developments to-date have largely failed to achieve enhanced civic engagement (Bekkers and Homburg 2007; Norris 2010), such gradual and linear development of social media use may not meet changing civic demand resulting from the ubiquitous nature of interactive technologies in citizens' everyday lives. Bonsón et al. (2012) found that European local governments are lagging behind their citizens in the use of social media for political engagement. They suggest that this situation presents missed opportunities for governments as their citizens discuss local policy options online, and argue that it is unlikely that social media tools will revolutionise government–citizen interactions when following predictable paths of e-government development (Bonsón et al. 2012; see also Norris and Reddick 2012). Mergel (2012) suggests that, rather than treating social media as broadcasting mechanisms, governments should refocus on emerging trends in public expectations and civic behaviours (see also Reddick and Norris 2013a). Governments should consider civic demand so that technological developments can be undertaken in a more citizen-centric and holistic manner. Such an approach would address the need for greater access to digital information and services as well as enable direct participation through everyday opportunities for civic engagement.

This chapter explores social media use at the local level in order to highlight some of the challenges that arise when civic demand and government use do not align (see Bonsón et al. 2012). Spaces for social media-enabled engagement hold promise at the local government level as the proximity of place retains importance in both digital and political practices (Farman 2012; Wilken and Goggin 2012;

Margolis and Moreno-Riaño 2009; Malina 1999). Moreover, connectivity and the broader social, economic, and political contexts of locales influence digital experiences (Martin 2014; Farman 2012). The communicative practices of local governments are therefore important spaces for democratic participation. Local government-run avenues for civic participation can capitalise on the fact that citizens perceive democratic involvement to primarily take place at the local level (Coudry and Langer 2005). The majority of everyday civic contact with government occurs locally, and citizens' increased sense of immediacy and familiarity with local issues drives political participation (Ellison and Hardey 2013; Shackleton 2010; Malina 1999). Furthermore, local digital spaces for civic participation often face fewer challenges than other levels of political involvement, particularly in relation to issues surrounding the scale and manageability of large volumes of data that often require filtering in order to increase usefulness (Kavanaugh et al. 2012; Jimenez et al. 2012; Mossberger et al. 2013). Councils can also draw upon their community knowledge in order to target digital initiatives to more effectively suit the needs of their citizens and locales (Bradford 2008).

Social media platforms offer governments at all levels opportunities to engage citizens, but they are particularly useful for councils that do not have the financial, technological, or staffing resources necessary to develop other mechanisms for digital participation. Mossberger et al. (2013) highlight that use of social media has been the fundamental change in local e-government practices in recent years. Other forms of digital interaction at the local level are also developing, although to a lesser extent (Mossberger et al. 2013). However, previous research has also demonstrated that local online mechanisms have been largely used for information dissemination and service delivery, rather than focused on new avenues for citizens' political participation (O'Toole 2009; Jensen 2009). The capacity of social media to enhance digital civic engagement therefore remains largely underutilised (Jimenez et al. 2012). For example, disseminating the headlines of media releases or allowing users to like, follow, or share posts does little in terms of enabling active citizen involvement (Macnamara 2012).

Macnamara (2012) suggests "there is a fundamental dichotomy between old politics and new media at multiple levels, which has not been adequately recognised by governments and political organisations jumping on the bandwagon of social media" (p. 81). He argues that receptivity and responsiveness need to be designed into the frameworks of digital communicative practices so that public involvement is afforded consideration in decision-making (Macnamara 2013; Jensen 2009). The capacity to impact decision-making, leading to action and change, makes participation more meaningful and enables citizens to develop a genuine sense of connection with government. It is this sense of connection that in turn facilitates greater civic engagement (Coleman and Blumler 2009). However, without an ongoing digital presence through which citizens can connect with governments, citizens may utilise these technologies to create their own volatile sites of resistance (Thompson 2005; Lester and Hutchins 2012). Government-led initiatives are therefore necessary to address an increasing demand for political participation and to help prevent instances of digital civic dissent.

Often research into local authorities' social media use centres on acute events, such as times of crises and elections (see, for example, Bruns 2012; Bird et al. 2012; Margo 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2012). These and other studies broadly highlight the benefits and limitations of government social media use, such as addressing citizens as partners rather than consumers, the value obtained through crowd sourcing voluntary public input, improved transparency of government operations, and the complexities and challenges surrounding responsibility and accountability for shared decision-making (Linders 2012; Hilgers and Ihl 2010; Henman 2010). However, exploring social media use around specific events limits insight into the ways that these technologies are redefining longer-term understandings and experiences of democratic participation. A distinction should therefore be made between government social media use in response to triggering events (such as natural disasters or elections) and civic use of social media to trigger government responses.

In his examination of social media use by five local governments in the Australian state of New South Wales, Holland (2014) argues that civic participation through councils' social networking sites makes visible behaviours that require government action (see also Thompson 2005). However, a dichotomy exists between civic and government expectations surrounding the purpose of social media use, with citizens' seeking participation and engagement and local governments often focusing on information provision (Holland 2014; see also Bonsón et al. 2012). This chapter seeks to further explore social media use in the everyday practices of Australian local governments, removed from triggering events, in order to determine whether these tools facilitate effective and ongoing government-to-citizen communication.

The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government has undertaken research into councils' social media use. For example, Purser (2012) draws from a survey of approximately 40 % of Australian local authorities which found that 69 % of the participating councils were using some form of social media; although she notes that councils without a social media presence were less likely to participate in the survey. Howard (2012) utilises a survey of the homepages of all Australian local government websites as well as a series of interviews with local government officials. She highlights that 11.4 % of Australian local governments use Facebook, 10.9 % use Twitter, and 4.1 % use YouTube (as indicated on their homepages in mid-2011). While these statistics differ, correlating findings between the studies include that many councils are yet to adapt to interactive possibilities, instead continuing to follow one-way communicative designs in their digital practices. The most significant barriers to social media use were found to be lack of resources and knowledge, with loss of control of messages and negative feedback from the community viewed as significant risks. While local governments do recognise that social media can help increase public engagement, both studies highlight insufficient levels of social media training and education offered to council staff (Purser 2012; Howard 2012). Interestingly, the two studies diverge in relation to community expectations. Purser's (2012) report suggests increased expectations are not seen as a significant risk. However, Howard's (2012) report indicates concern that local government social media use will raise expectations (such as response times) to a level beyond councils' capacity.

Despite increasing focus on digital civic engagement at the local level, participatory practices are often not accepted as fundamental or formal spaces for communities to interact with governments (Aulich 2009). Local spaces for civic engagement are frequently considered to be tokenistic attempts to placate the community as there are few opportunities for citizens to directly influence the decision-making processes that shape their everyday lives (Scott et al. 2007; Jensen 2009). While many authorities are failing to exploit the conversational possibilities enabled by digital technologies, social media and other platforms for civic engagement do hold potential to provide “local citizens increased political voice in what is inevitably becoming an increasingly complex communications environment” (Ellison and Hardey 2013, p. 894). As such, it is necessary to explore current barriers to local digital civic engagement so that future practices may overcome existing limitations.

11.3 The Australian Context

Australia has three-tiers of representative government. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2012), there are 559 local governments in Australia. The diversity of Australian local authorities provides a challenging context for equitable digital government development, with municipal populations ranging from just over a hundred citizens (such as the Shires of Murchison, Sandstone, and Westonia in Western Australia) to well over a million (the City of Brisbane in Queensland), and some local government areas that are larger than many countries (the Shire of East Pilbara in Western Australia covers more than 370,000 km²). Local governments have limited authority but are responsible for most day-to-day services and facilities such as waste collection, libraries and community centres, town planning, and local transport.

The importance of digital government at the local level is recognised in Australian federal policy including the *National Digital Economy Strategy*, which stresses that digitally aware local governments will drive greater engagement by communities (Department of Broadband and Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) 2011a). The emphasis on improving Australia’s position in the digital economy—through e-government and other areas—directly links to broadband internet infrastructure developments under the National Broadband Network (NBN). The Federal Government is investing significant resources into the provision of ubiquitous high-speed broadband through fibre optic, fixed wireless, and satellite technologies (see Bowles and Wilson 2012). While internet access is increasing under the NBN, infrastructure developments to-date have been uneven, particularly between urban and remote areas (Dobson et al. 2013). But the increased attention on access to the internet has also contributed to greater emphasis on developing digital government practices, particularly in relation to service delivery. The Federal Government has subsequently set a goal to transition government services into “digital first” format by the end of 2017 (DBCDE 2013).

The Australian Federal Government provides assistance to a limited number of local governments and their communities through the “digital local government” and “digital communities” programmes. Under these schemes, public training hubs have been provided in 40 areas with NBN access and their local governments are eligible to apply for funding to develop their digital services (DBCDE 2011a, b). However, there is little assistance offered directly to the remaining councils, and this has resulted in the autonomous development of ad hoc local digital practices. Most local digital practices continue to focus on information dissemination and service delivery as these offer financial savings through increased efficiency (O’Toole 2009). The capacity of information and communication technologies as platforms for increased political participation and to facilitate direct connections between citizens and local representatives remains largely overlooked. The increased costs and time involved in more participatory two-way opportunities for civic engagement are deterrents for many local governments, particularly smaller authorities with limited resources such as those governing small or geographically dispersed rural communities.

11.4 Methodology

This chapter draws from a range of research projects into local e-government, digital civic participation, and connectivity issues in Australia. The quantitative data is taken from a nation-wide survey of the digital activities of 559 Australian local governments. The purpose of the survey was to document the extensive range of current e-government mechanisms at the local level, particularly through councils’ websites. The survey included both quantitative and qualitative measures to explore a variety of functions including the usability of websites, the types of content available, forms of information dissemination, the availability of e-commerce transactions, and different types of interaction between governments and citizens. Due to the substantial number of Australian local governments, the survey was undertaken during 2012 and 2013 by the researcher and two assistants. In order to help ensure consistency, a detailed coding sheet was used to guide data collection, which was particularly necessary for areas that required individual judgements—for example, when determining perceived usability of websites as opposed to more straightforward assessments relating to the availability of certain information or functions. For the purpose of this chapter’s focus on civic engagement, results related to the use of commonplace social media platforms and other types of direct government-to-citizen interaction are primarily discussed here. The results of the survey were also used to identify individual local governments that offer innovative digital practices.

There are some limitations of the survey that should be recognised, which largely relate to the challenges of studying a field in which frequent technological and political changes take place. The time frame of data collection meant that digital practices were likely to change during the collection period. For example, local

governments assessed early may have updated their digital practices before the research was finalised, and those assessed later on had additional time in which digital developments may have taken place. The time frame was also drawn out due to the fact that local government elections were held during the collection period. This meant that local governments shifted into caretaker mode; while their administrative roles continued, any significant decisions or new developments could not be made until election results were finalised and returning or new representatives were in office. In terms of e-government, councils' digital activities, particularly those that involved interactive features such as social media use, were temporarily suspended and could not be assessed during this time. For these reasons, the quantitative data presented in this chapter are intended only to provide a snapshot into digital local government in Australia.

Further qualitative contextual information about local e-government development is also offered to compliment the survey results and highlight the challenges involved in digital civic participation practices for both governments and citizens. Such an approach is necessary in order to demonstrate the complexities of local digital civic engagement that may be masked within larger statistical datasets (see Wolff and Andrews 2010). The comments from local government officials offered in this chapter are drawn from a full-day workshop on digital engagement held in May 2014 with seven rural local governments from the state of New South Wales. Participants included mayors, councillors, general managers, economic development officers, and information officers. The comments from citizens are drawn from focus groups conducted with residents of a large and well-resourced urban municipality in the state of Victoria during mid-2013. Their local government offers advanced avenues for digital engagement including use of social media and online discussion forums. Further details of the methodologies for the workshop and focus groups are available in Park et al. (2015) and Freeman and McCallum (2013), respectively. While these projects were not specifically designed to interconnect, their findings provide an opportunity to highlight contrasting experiences of the value and usefulness of digital participation opportunities at the local level, and compliment conclusions drawn from the survey data. Their integration therefore enables a more detailed understanding of the nuances surrounding both limited and advanced digital local government practices, and offers insight into the overall state of everyday contexts for local digital civic engagement in Australia.

11.5 Digital Civic Engagement with Australian Local Governments

Social media and other spaces for civic participation are gaining prominence in the digital practices of Australian local governments. This section presents indicative findings in relation to local e-government development from the survey outlined above, and suggests implications in terms of civic engagement. It begins by briefly

highlighting the results for a selection of information dissemination and service delivery practices through local government websites before exploring current levels of digital government-to-citizen interaction through participatory spaces.

The data is separated to provide: the overall percentage across all 559 Australian local governments; the results for local government authorities that govern municipal populations of less than 15,000 (based on 2012 population figures from the ABS); and the results for capital city local governments. The reason for this breakdown is to offer insight into the digital practices offered in various regions in Australia. Reddick and Norris (2013b) note that population size and geographic location are key variables that influence the adoption of e-government practices. Approximately 55 % of Australian local governments have municipal populations of less than 15,000 (ABS 2012). These smaller local governments from rural or remote regions face different issues in comparison to urban city local governments, particularly in terms of digital connectivity, resources, and capacity to implement digital participatory practices. Capital city local governments were selected only to offer indicative figures for urban digital government development. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

11.5.1 Information Dissemination and Service Delivery

Like elsewhere in the world (Ellison and Hardey 2013; Sobaci and Karkin 2013; Norris and Reddick 2012), digital information and services dominate Australian local e-government. These types of practices are important aspects of e-government as they facilitate the development of informed citizenries and can help build civic confidence in government (Linders 2012; Bonsón et al. 2012). Tables 11.1 and 11.2 highlight that Australian authorities are actively using their websites to increase the dissemination of local information and to offer digital services. Two noticeable characteristics emerge from the below data. The first is that across all categories of evaluation, urban city governments consistently perform better in terms of the

Table 11.1 Australian local government internet use—information dissemination

	Australian local government average (%)	Local governments, populations <15,000 (%)	Capital city local governments (%)
Local service information	95	92	100
Council news	88	82	100
Media releases	60	40	100
Minutes/agendas of council meetings	96	93	100
Policy documentation	82	70	100
Budget information	86	79	100
E-newsletters	33	20	43

Table 11.2 Australian local government internet use—service delivery

	Australian local government average (%)	Local governments, populations <15,000 (%)	Capital city local governments (%)
Downloadable forms	84	72	100
Online submission of forms	12	–	43
E-service requests	58	39	100
Digital payments for rates	70	47	100

digital information and services offered than their rural counterparts. The second is that as digital practices become more complex, they are significantly less likely to be used.

It is worth noting that these figures are offered only to provide an indication of Australian local e-government development and in some cases the quantitative measures do not necessarily reflect the quality of the information or services provided. For example, while 88 % of Australian local governments provide council news through their websites, more than half of these were classified as offering only minimal information where there were fewer than 15 items in total and content was updating irregularly. Cases like these suggest that many Australian local governments still have a substantial task ahead of them in order to capitalise on the internet to increase the transparency of detailed information.

Local governments have a responsibility to keep their communities informed and the internet offers a cost-efficient tool through which they can distribute local news and information (O’Toole 2009). Australian local governments, particularly those that are urban based, have recognised this and provide detailed information online. However, the vast majority of these developments rely upon citizens actively seeking information through government websites. Significantly fewer councils (a third overall) take the initiative to actively send out newsletters via email to their citizens. As can be expected in rural Australian areas with limited infrastructure access and lower digital literacy levels (Morris 2012), the figures for rural local governments indicate they are less likely to provide digital information. However, accessible local community news is becoming particularly important in rural areas where traditional sources (such as regional newspapers) are rapidly disappearing in the networked environment (Kavanaugh et al. 2014). This suggests that, as digital access and capacities increase, there may be a future opportunity for rural councils to provide greater online information for their communities.

Straightforward service delivery practices, such as downloadable forms that must be submitted by post (e.g. planning permit applications), were very common amongst Australian local governments. Additionally, more than half of Australian authorities enable simple service requests (such as ordering replacement rubbish bins) to be completed entirely online. However, more complex applications—such

as allowing planning permits to be both completed and submitted online—are less common. This signals that Australian authorities have a significant challenge ahead in developing digital first services. Rural councils again lag behind with this inconsistency likely stemming from limited levels of connectivity and less capacity to develop digital services (Morris 2012). Interestingly, however, rural Australian councils provide more community services than urban authorities in order to help ensure social inclusion (Broadband for the Bush Alliance 2013). This suggests that connectivity and capacity issues in rural areas will require greater consideration as government services transition into digital first format.

Given the financial benefits that digital information and services offer governments (Bekkers and Homburg 2007), the results presented in this section are unsurprising. However, as digital first information and services become more pervasive with the widespread acceptance of technologies, citizens are likely to expect and demand the use of digital technologies for other forms of interaction with government.

11.5.2 Civic Participation

This section explores opportunities for ongoing deliberation through two-way dialogue between citizens and local governments. Table 11.3 highlights that digital participation through social media is still largely in its formative stages in Australian local governments, although there are promising signs of development and innovation in urban areas.

The use of discussion forums provides evidence that a small number of local governments are trying new methods to connect with the community and gain more detailed feedback. Across Australia, approximately 7 % of councils enable online discussions with citizens through forums. The majority of these are metropolitan and urban fringe governments, with only rare rural and remote cases (0.3 %). The forums are often framed around topical issues predetermined by the governments as

Table 11.3 Australian local government internet use—civic participation

	Australian local government average (%)	Local governments, populations <15,000 (%)	Capital city local governments (%)
Discussion forums	7	0.3	29
Twitter	26	6	86
YouTube	13	4	43
Facebook	39	26	86
• <i>Person instead of organisation</i>	1	3	–
• <i>Restricted</i>	10	5	–
• <i>Unrestricted</i>	28	18	86

opposed to allowing citizens to have a general space to connect with representatives and raise their own queries (Freeman 2013). More than half of the discussion forums available are outsourced to commercial companies, suggesting there are issues surrounding local government capacity to develop and manage their own discussion forums, such as having sufficient technical knowledge and the staff time required for moderation (Mossberger et al. 2013). Outsourcing also indicates that there may be a broad reluctance to directly incorporate this type of space for civic engagement into the everyday and official operations of councils, which is particularly evident when many of the forums do not use the government internet domain. Unfortunately, while these types of forums often enable increased citizen-to-citizen interaction, they currently provide little evidence of direct interactions between governments and citizens (Freeman 2013). This suggests these spaces are largely tokenistic gestures for community engagement, with little capacity for community members to actively engage in deliberative discussions with representatives.

Social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, offer useful alternatives for local governments that wish to connect with citizens but are unable to afford to outsource discussion forums. While dialogue through social media can be limited in comparison to discussion forums (e.g. due to character restraints), these platforms require little digital training, are free to implement (excluding costs of staff time), and can capitalise on an already existing pool of users. Table 11.3 indicates that social media use by Australian local governments is more prominent than discussion forums; however, there are substantial differences between urban and rural local governments. For example, while 26 % of councils across Australia use Twitter, when considering the different levels of its use in rural (6 %) and urban (86 %) areas, Twitter is significantly more dominant in metropolitan municipalities. Also worth noting is that the number of councils using Twitter does not necessarily reflect the quality of its use, with many further disseminating headlines of media releases or promoting local events, rather than using it to facilitate two-way civic participation (Holland 2014; Purser 2012).

Similarly, YouTube has a higher proportion of use amongst urban areas, with these governments often uploading media coverage for promotion or using YouTube to host videos that encourage tourism or relocation to the municipality. Use of YouTube was more common than direct webcasting through council websites; less than 2 % of all Australian local governments webcast, and slightly fewer offer podcasts (there was no overlap between the councils that webcast and those that podcast). No local governments with populations of less than 15,000 offer either type of application even though these councils often cover larger geographical areas, which makes it harder for citizens to, for example, physically attend council meetings. Overall, Facebook (39 %) is the most common form of social media used by Australian local governments (Purser 2012; Howard 2012). Table 11.3 also highlights, however, that there appears to be some ambiguity around the type of account that local governments should employ (person, restricted, unrestricted), which suggests there is uncertainty amongst councils about the best way to use social media platforms, such as their level of openness and how they should be managed (see Oliveira and Welch 2013; Hofmann et al. 2013).

There are limited instances of local governments using other interactive tools such as Flickr, Pinterest, and Instagram to address the growing relationship between mobile devices and place (Wilken and Goggin 2012). For example, approximately 4 % of Australian local governments use the mobile application Snap Send Solve, including just under 3 % of smaller authorities (note, this figure is based on the number of councils that indicate they use Snap Send Solve on their websites). This (purchasable) tool enables citizens to take photos of issues such as potholes or graffiti on their smart phone or tablet device, tag the location with their GPS coordinates, and submit a report to the corresponding local authority. There are also a handful of urban councils that have developed their own innovative applications. For example, Parramatta City Council (near Sydney) has a smart parking application that allows users to view nearby available car parking spaces through interactive maps. These types of developments predominantly focus on information dissemination and service delivery practices, rather than capitalising on the increasing use of mobile devices in everyday life to establish new forms of two-way communication with citizens.

A notable exception is Randwick City Council, which is a large metropolitan municipality in the suburbs of Sydney with a population of approximately 134,000 citizens. Randwick has implemented its own myRandwick mobile application that allows citizens to, amongst other things, monitor development proposals in their area, look up local service information or latest news and events, complete surveys, and join discussions forums on topical issues. This example demonstrates innovation in Australian digital local government; however, it is worth noting that the two-way features enabled by this mobile application face similar challenges to mechanisms run directly through websites. An example is a consultation that ran between 2011 and 2013 on the development of a light rail system. In this instance and in addition to traditional forms of information dissemination and formal submissions, the government provided extensive digital documentation to help inform the community (including videos), ran a survey, and provided online discussion spaces (operated by an outsourced company). There were eight topic areas in the light rail forum, all set by the government, which asked for feedback on issues including funding, potential impacts and benefits, routes, and citizens' current travel arrangements, and it enabled people to agree or disagree with other posts. In all, there were 767 comments posted across the eight topic areas, with 42,383 views of the discussions (as of August 2014).

The council recognised the significance and direct impact of the proposed development on the local community, and this is reflected by the level of community engagement that took place including the number of civic comments on the site, the fact that citizens were interacting with each other, and as many of the posts provided extensive well-considered suggestions. Following the approval of the light rail development, the council acknowledged that they "have listened to the community" (Berejiklian 2014) particularly in relation to managing the development in order to minimise the impacts of construction (such as noise) on the surrounding community. Moreover, the government is continuing to keep the community informed of progress through both traditional (letterbox drops, community forums, newspaper

advertisements) and digital (website) means. The consultation and opportunities for civic engagement offered by Randwick City Council are commendable. However, there was one element that was clearly missing from the digital consultation, which was government involvement in the forum's discussions. Of the 767 comments, only two posts were directly identified as being by someone affiliated with the local government (Randwick Administrator), with one containing only a picture of the proposed light rail route and the other containing only the words "test comment". There was also evidence that the administrator had removed two civic posts (one due to duplication). Amid otherwise admirable efforts, overlooking the importance of joining in dialogue with citizens means the local government missed a key opportunity to enable citizens to develop a genuine sense of connection with government that would help to further strengthen local democracy.

11.6 Challenges for Local Digital Engagement

As the figures in the above section suggest, despite significant investments in broadband connectivity in recent years there are ongoing discrepancies between urban and rural local governments' digital media use. Rural local governments face additional challenges when implementing digital civic engagement practices. Morris (2012) indicates that digital access and literacy are the biggest challenges to social media use in rural, remote, and Indigenous local government areas in Australia, followed by the financial and human resource limitations that urban municipalities also experience (Purser 2012; Howard 2012). This section seeks to provide greater insight into the challenges that rural local governments face in terms of advancing digital engagement practices and draws from the views of seven rural New South Wales councils. It then offers insights into local digital engagement from the views of citizens from a metropolitan municipality within the state of Victoria, where the local government has already employed the use of social media and discussion forums for increased citizen engagement.

11.6.1 Barriers to Rural Digital Practices

The seven participating rural local governments understood the benefits and opportunities that improved access to the internet would offer their communities, such as facilitating social and economic development for their regions (see Hogan and Young 2013; Wolff and Andrews 2010). However, the governments were reluctant to implement more interactive digital practices when they could not be done well. At the time of the survey, three of the seven councils were active on social media (each with a Facebook account and one also used Twitter). Four councils had no social media presence. Since this time and as evidence of the rapid proliferation of social media in both society and government processes (see Mossberger et al. 2013), another council has created both a Facebook and Twitter profile, one has begun

using Facebook and another has begun using Twitter. Currently then, six of the seven councils are using social media (including five on Facebook and three on Twitter). Only one council remains to have no social media presence, and none offer online discussion forums.

The rural local governments highlighted key issues surrounding their connectivity, capacity, and resources to use social media and other digital forms of civic engagement. In terms of connectivity, current plans for broadband development under the NBN have done little to aid rural access to the internet in these regions (Park et al. 2015). Fibre optic connections remain rare and those citizens connected to NBN broadband through fixed wireless and satellite connections continue to be inundated with issues surrounding latency, intermittent signals, dropped connections during peak use times, and higher costs of connection than urban citizens. As Prieger (2013) notes, “Even when broadband is available to rural communities, its quality—whether measured by speed of other characteristics like mobility—often lags that found in the nearest urban centre” (pp. 489–490). Such a situation presents significant challenges for rural local governments when using digital practices to communicate with citizens.

In addition to connectivity, one of the main barriers that these governments face for digital practices relates to sufficient resources, particularly in terms of staffing costs:

With Twitter we’ve gone from zero users a year ago to nearly 400 now... We don’t promote it very heavily because we don’t have the staff to really sustain an interaction but we do interact on the two sites [Twitter and Facebook]. If you were going to do it the way the platforms really are being driven elsewhere, you’d have several staff doing it and doing it much more aggressively. (Chief Information Officer)

The councils recognised that social media offer new means for communicating with citizens, but these smaller rural local governments are significantly less likely to possess the necessary resources needed to manage interactive communication through social networking sites. As such, the councils using social media predominantly focus on information dissemination to further distribute media releases and promote local events, and recognised the value added by this practice (see also Purser 2012; Howard 2012). For example, one official highlighted that their Twitter account was followed by a radio station in a nearby city, which has frequent holiday makers travel to the municipality. The radio station re-tweets information to their larger base of followers, which provides useful notifications of highway closures and delays. There was also evidence, however, that the current levels of information dissemination through social media were not sufficient for citizens. In particular, citizens sought out information from councils in response to emergency situations where they viewed local governments as a source of authority, but did not realise that the councils were not necessarily in the right position to coordinate emergency information:

We got into a difficult situation with the bushfires out here recently where users of social media didn’t understand that council wasn’t necessarily the source of information about the bushfires... unless you’ve got massive resource levels to man Twitter and Facebook, any sort of response is just totally unrealistic. (Mayor)

The above quotation provides evidence that civic and local government uses of social media do not always align (Bonsón et al. 2012). The governments using social media limited their current interactions through the sites due to insufficient resources as well as different civic and government expectations:

It's important to think at the start of going into any of this [digital government] what the potential consequences are and what the community expectations at play may be... [citizens are] using social media as an alternative to the more standard means of communication that we've had in the past within local government... people in the community think if they're going to give the council some information or raise an issue it should be addressed. The whole window of what social media is now means that what's considered reasonable by someone in the public is very different for social media compared to when they send something through the mail in writing. (General Manager)

The prominence of digital technologies in everyday life has contributed to changing civic understandings of communicating with government (Jaeger and Bertot 2010). While these governments view social media largely as non-official communication channels, they thought citizens viewed posting to the governments' Twitter or Facebook sites as just as official as lodging formal requests (see also Howard 2012). Moreover, citizens' expected immediate responses to comments posted on social media: "There's this expectation of immediate response" (Mayor). While social media offer local governments opportunities to respond to misinformation through mainstream media and distribute important information rapidly (Howard 2012), this does not mean they are able to manage responses to civic comments in such a timely manner. The need to further educate the community on the governance processes that shape action surrounding civic concerns was subsequently suggested. However, the reverse is also applicable. As digital media are becoming embedded in all aspects of society and as governments continue to push citizens to use digital first services, then it is likely that governments at all levels will need to reconsider and adapt their processes to new conceptions surrounding digital civic participation. At the moment, these governments are failing to engage the community within the spaces in which the community wants to engage the government, instead redirecting their involvement to other channels, which can present a frustrating situation for citizens.

To some degree, however, recognition of changing forms of political dialogue is taking place within the local governments. One general manager, for example, highlighted that governments' social media accounts can provide platforms for increased citizen-to-citizen interaction:

I would never enter into an arrangement where people from the public thought that they were going to get a response on every issue that they raise through social media. I'd make it clear up front that council is doing this as an information sharing idea, but there should not be an expectation that everything will be responded to. (General Manager)

Repurposing social media as information sharing platforms between citizens may potentially partially alleviate government workloads by enabling citizens to help each other in resolving issues. These governments are not currently in a position to be able to offer their communities more receptive and responsive government-to-citizen interaction through social media and currently have to prevent

such forms of digital civic engagement due to their limited resources (see also Purser 2012): “From a policy point of view, I’d say there’d be no guarantee of any response to social media. The expectations are just ludicrous” (Mayor).

Use of mobile applications for service delivery was also discussed. However, there was strong reluctance to spend limited resources purchasing products when they are not necessarily compatible with all brands of devices. Moreover, for these councils, use of more innovative service applications was not necessary when they are already aware of local issues, they just do not have the resources required to address them:

In the end people by and large can just email things into our records email address and do it that way. There was actually push back inside the council from staff in the sense of saying we don’t need Snap Send Solve; we know where the pot holes are, we just don’t have the staff to get out there and do it. So someone sending us another 12 pictures of it isn’t going to help. (Chief Information Officer)

There are currently inequitable opportunities for digital civic engagement in rural and urban Australian areas. As the comments in this section suggest, rural local governments are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to enabling civic engagement through social media and other digital platforms, particularly due to their limited connectivity and resources. While urban governments are further ahead in terms of the interactive opportunities they offer citizens, provision of these spaces does not necessarily ensure their effective use.

11.6.2 Limitations of Urban Digital Practices

While larger urban local governments often possess greater resources and the advanced connectivity needed to develop digital practices, governing sizeable populations is also likely to impact on their capacity to manage ongoing dialogue with citizens. The citizens from the urban municipality conveyed a strong desire to engage with their local government, but they were largely disenfranchised with the government’s disinterest and unwillingness to engage with the community through consultative processes (Freeman and McCallum 2013). While the government offers an extensive website, social media interaction (including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube), and an online discussion portal, opportunities for civic engagement were viewed as “just a token” (Citizen). The citizens unanimously thought they were “never going to have an impact” (Citizen) on local decision-making. Overall, methods for public participation were understood to be hollow gestures, and citizens’ perceived that the local government “don’t really want us to have a say or an opinion” (Citizen).

In terms of digital interactions, the citizens’ comments indicated that while they were reaching out to connect with their local government online, their attempts were left unanswered: “As far as I can tell, they [the local government] never respond. But there’s a lot of citizens commenting to other citizens” (Citizen). This

individual has highlighted what was recognised by the rural local government official above, in that government-run spaces do enable new forms of citizen-to-citizen political dialogue. However, civic political discussions do not equate to engagement with government. Without government-to-citizen interaction, civic comments through social networking sites are unlikely to influence the decision-making processes that shape the community: “I’d like to know that the council look at them [online comments] and base some decisions around the feedback they get from people, because, after all, it’s our rates that are supporting the city” (Citizen).

The citizens also demonstrated a broad range of concerns surrounding the council’s implementation of its online discussion forum. These concerns included that, like other platforms, the government fails to respond to matters citizens raise through the site and there was no evidence to suggest that civic comments were informing local decision-making: “It is a bit like Facebook in a way, that you can say something, but it’s not going to go anywhere” (Citizen). Citizens are unable to create their own topics for discussion, meaning they were limited to topics predetermined by the government: “the way they set it up is that it’s essentially a website with lots of different discussion areas, but *they* get to *set* the discussion areas” (Citizen, emphasis added). Moreover, there was also concern about the fact that, like most Australian councils’ discussion forums, the site is developed and managed by an external company:

My biggest beef is that that particular website is managed by an outsourced [company]... you have to agree to all these conditions to be on this website, and I’m thinking, I don’t want all these third party people to have my information. If it was a council operated one, they have your details already, we don’t have to give them to somebody else. (Citizen)

Mergel (2014) highlights that governments may be reluctant to use social media sites due to the fact that they cannot control changes in sites run by third parties. The above comment suggests that citizens too dislike using third party providers. While outsourcing discussion forums may relieve pressure on local governments, it suggests to citizens that these spaces are not official channels and raises questions surrounding the privacy and security of data. As such, it may be better—for both governments and citizens—to incorporate discussion forums directly into government websites and everyday operations. Such an approach would be in line with Macnamara’s (2013) suggestion that receptive and responsive practices need to be built into the architecture of communicative processes in order to facilitate digital civic engagement. At the moment, the fact that this local government is failing to provide any feedback to citizens about how their online views are received and considered in decision-making (if at all) is leading citizens to withdraw from this digital space and disengage with local political matters:

They have an online thing [discussion forum] where you can comment on certain things, for example transport issues, but you only get to have your say; you don’t get any feedback from it. It’s all one way. You might get a reply, ‘We’ve received your reply’, but... you don’t get any feedback about how it’s going or not. So I don’t bother with that anymore because I thought this is a good thing to do, but it just isn’t followed through. (Citizen)

There is no indication that any forum posts are from local representatives or officials; there is only evidence of a moderator from the third party provider who infrequently posts standardised responses on behalf of the local government. Having moderators post generic responses offers little capacity for improved government-to-citizen interaction. Notably, civic comments on the forum also question the council's sporadic and generic responses that fail to provide feedback, and they even suggest that the site has been set up as a "front" to stop citizens from bothering the council (Freeman 2013).

There is little point in developing opportunities for digital civic engagement if they are not used effectively by local governments. The citizens who participated in these focus groups were eager to be involved in local political matters: "I should have the right to have my say, I should have the right to be heard, and I should have the right not to be dismissed" (Citizen). However, ineffective spaces for digital engagement lead to a sense of disconnection from government and create a reluctance to further engage on local political matters: "the perceptions of a lot of the residents is there's no point because they're not going to listen to you in any case" (Citizen). Such withdrawal is the result of an unmet civic desire for political engagement and should not be confused with political apathy. In this instance, the limitations of government-run digital practices are impacting upon civic engagement and inhibiting citizens' willingness to be involved in local political matters. Left unremedied, such digital spaces threaten to exacerbate civic dissatisfaction with, and disconnection from, local government.

11.7 Conclusion

Social media and other interactive platforms are often viewed by governments as disruptive technologies, with reluctance to enable two-way civic participatory spaces where information cannot be controlled (Chun et al. 2010; Margo 2012). As a result, governments have continued to prioritise the development of digital information and service delivery practices over new avenues for civic engagement. However, as interactive technologies become part of the everyday and citizens appropriate digital platforms for their own purposes, civic expectations surrounding digital participation with governments are changing (Mergel 2012; Jaeger and Bertot 2010; Holland 2014). Increasing civic demand for participation and direct connection with representatives requires governments move beyond the provision of information and services to take a more holistic and citizen-centric approach to digital government development. Digital communicative practices must offer receptivity and responsiveness so that involvement can inform decision-making, in turn enabling a sense of connection with government and greater civic engagement (Macnamara 2013; Coleman and Blumler 2009). Gradual and linear progression through stages of digital government maturity (Lee and Kwak 2012; Chun et al. 2010) may be insufficient to take account of and address rapidly changing civic demand in the current era of communicative abundance.

This chapter illustrates a precarious and inequitable state of local digital civic engagement in Australia, with everyday practices remaining heavily focused on disseminating information and new avenues for service delivery (see also Purser 2012; Howard 2012; Holland 2014). Australian local governments have begun to recognise changing civic expectations surrounding digital interaction with government and are adapting to new communicative possibilities, particularly through social media platforms commonly used by citizens. However, current government uses of these and other spaces for digital civic participation do not yet align with civic demand (Bonsón et al. 2012). Employing interactive tools for predominantly one-way communication fails to capitalise on the possibilities enabled by the technologies, which is leading citizens to view opportunities for digital discourse as tokenistic and is causing civic dissatisfaction with government. In order to avoid such situations, governments must reconceptualise how they approach digital participation.

The findings of this research suggest two key initial steps that can be taken. The first is for governments to fully consider the purpose of digital participation spaces and recognise that a shift in government use—away from the current culture of controlling information (Margo 2012; Howard 2012)—is necessary. Government officials' current reluctance to interact with citizens online and the perception that digital participation is not a genuine form of civic involvement will need to be overcome. The second point relates to the hesitation to incorporate spaces for digital citizen participation directly into the ongoing, everyday and official channels of government communication, as evidenced by local governments' outsourcing the development and management of discussion forums. Outsourcing is a considerably costly use of limited resources (particularly given citizens distrust third party providers) if civic input through forums is not considered by governments. Including discussion spaces within official government websites and mobile applications—and allowing citizens to propose discussion topics—will help increase citizens' perceived legitimacy of these engagement initiatives and will offer governments a better sense of the issues important to their communities.

There are, however, substantial barriers to the development and use of participatory practices at the local government level in Australia. In particular, the diversity of local governments means there are unequal levels of financial and staffing resources as well as technological capacity (Purser 2012; Howard 2012), with additional constraints deriving from variable levels of connectivity (Morris 2012). Rural local governments are considerably disadvantaged in relation to the development and implementation of digital spaces for civic participation. While the Federal Government is investing in improved broadband infrastructure (DBCDE 2011a), divides in access, skills and capacity are unlikely to be swiftly remedied. In order to help ensure equitable opportunities for digital participation, the Federal Government could provide greater assistance specifically to rural councils. Additional resources and support may include, for example, training and education programmes for council staff or the provision of digital archetypes to help save development costs (Broadband for the Bush Alliance 2013; Wolff and Andrews 2010). Moreover, local governments that already receive assistance as part of the limited federal programmes available could be encouraged to share the digital resources and knowledge obtained

with other councils. Alternatively, capacity may be enhanced if councils develop digital programmes in partnership with local government associations at state or federal level (Howard 2012).

While urban local government digital practices are more advanced—and there are promising signs of innovation, such as the myRandwick mobile application—there is still a need for greater government interaction through ongoing and reciprocal conversational spaces (see Ellison and Hardey 2013). Opportunities for digital civic participation are being implemented without local governments fully considering their purpose (Howard 2012). Reddick and Norris (2013a) highlight that in order for governments to take digital participation seriously, they must find out what citizens want and act on their preferences. It is not sufficient to simply provide digital spaces or jump on the bandwagon of social media (Macnamara 2012). Ironically, this point was recognised by the participating rural councils that indicated the need to think ahead in terms of potential consequences and community expectations; of course this also shaped their hesitation to implement digital practices if they could not be done properly.

While spaces for digital civic participation are unlikely to radically transform representative government (Bonsón et al. 2012), they do offer opportunities to enhance government-to-citizen interaction, provide greater voice to citizens, and help foster local democracy. This, of course, relies on governments being prepared to take part in ongoing reciprocal conversations with citizens and consider public input in decision-making (Ellison and Hardey 2013; Macnamara 2013). Bonsón et al. (2012) argue that, “For local governments, not engaging now involves a greater risk than engaging: citizens will use these networks to talk about them, whether local governments add their voices to the conversation or not” (p. 131). Not engaging with citizens online certainly presents risks for local governments, as adept citizens can easily use networked tools for civic dissent. But, if used ineffectively, government spaces for digital civic engagement are also problematic. Governments that fail to partake in two-way ongoing and everyday dialogue risk disenfranchising citizens, causing civic reluctance to engage on political matters, and creating a sense of disconnection from government.

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