

How are you using social media, and how are citizens using social media to connect with their neighbors, solve problems, and discuss local issues?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 9 OF 14**

Connecting Neighbors to Solve Problems

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Neighbors for Neighbors is a communication platform that links 18 networks, one for each neighborhood in Boston, through a social networking medium. The organization does not have an issue base or policy agenda, but rather strives to empower neighborhoods to define those items on their own.

Many local stakeholders help enrich the discussions. City employees, police officers, nonprofit program coordinators and other leaders share information and interact with members to help their constituents solve problems. Municipal personnel can also message all members to mobilize them around immediate threats, such as spikes in crime or public health hazards.

Through blogs, forum discussions, photos, videos, music, groups and embeddable media, users can get answers to their questions, find solutions to their needs, promote community events, share media, and organize and participate in interest groups. Users also participate in neighborhood zone groups where they communicate about neighborhood happenings such as community projects, crime, block parties and yard sales. The network enjoys over 6,500 visitors each month.



Local officials are increasingly determined to engage their constituents online. But local leaders sometimes overlook the first step they should take: mapping out how residents are using online technologies and how they are sorting themselves into online groups and networks. In that sense, online engagement is not so different from the traditional face-to-face work: to involve the public, you first need to map out where they are and what they belong to.

Some communities now have a full complement of blogs, listservs, news sites and other online spaces that cover local news, politics and community. Neighborhood-level online spaces – sometimes called “hyperlocal” sites – are also growing rapidly. Government sites are also getting more traffic, and more people are asking for online opportunities to provide input to government, rather than simply downloading information from government.

The concern about the “digital divide,” which used to focus on the relatively simple question of how many (and what kinds of) people had Internet access, has become much more complicated. Though the level of access continues to rise, there are still disparities, particularly between people of different income levels. There are also important differences in the hardware people are using to access the Internet. For example, younger people, people of color, and those with lower income levels are more likely to use cell phones and other mobile devices than desktop computers. Rather than focusing only on the question of who has Internet access, local officials need to understand what kinds of technologies will reach particular segments of the population. And above all, they need to know where people are gathered online, and how to connect and build relationships with those networks.

MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA:

- What are the main online spaces where people can find out, and comment on, what is happening in your city?
- Are there any neighborhood-level online forums?
- What is the general tenor of the discussion in these online spaces? Do they have well-established and well-enforced community guidelines governing the behavior of people who contribute posts or comments? Are people allowed to log in anonymously, or must they use their real names?
- What is your sense of whether and how different groups in your city – young people, seniors, recent immigrants, and underserved households – are using online technologies?

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Conduct a more comprehensive mapping project of local online spaces.
- Convene a set of local bloggers and other online leaders, and talk with them about the state of the local online community.
- Review the technologies being used at City Hall, and consider whether they are sufficient for greater outreach and interaction with the public online.
- For up-to-date information on citizens' use of online technology and their expectations of government, see reports from the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life, and the Knight Foundation's work on the "Information Needs of Local Communities."
- Conduct a more comprehensive survey of Internet use in your community, to find out what kinds of people have access, what kinds of hardware they are using, and where they congregate online.

