

# **Embracing Social Media to Enhance Public Participation**

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## **Abstract**

2011 witnessed the Arab Spring with social media effectively harnessed to mobilise, organize and activate mass public support for popular protests throughout the Middle East region. 2011 was also the year in which social media and mobile telecommunications catalysed environmental and social movements' public participation and invigorated opinion and opposition to energy, planning, transport and infrastructure development proposals around the globe. In parallel, 2011 also saw (public and private sector) project proponents counter this tide of community and special interest opinion by harnessing the 'people power' of social media, and novel forms of public consultation, themselves to better manage stakeholders and to mobilise support for their development proposals and environmental impact assessments. This paper aims to share Hong Kong's social and digital media engagement experience and provide a timely update for environmental impact assessment practitioners around the globe on deployment of novel and IT-based public consultation 'social media' strategy and tactics. This paper will also report on which party (proponent or 'opponent') is best way using new e-technologies to win the battle for hearts and minds, public opinion and project approvals in such communication campaigns and public and interest group consultations. The paper will touch on the consequences for Hong Kong and Mainland China's rates of economic development and growth and environment and on the role of participatory development and inclusiveness in modern stakeholder management in enhancement of environmental governance.

This paper aims to share Hong Kong's social media engagement experience and deployment of social media strategy and tactics to enhance public participation and community understanding of development projects.

## **Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is undoubtedly the century of information technology. The world has moved from fixed copper phone lines to mobile telephony to, in the more developed parts of the world, ubiquitous wireless data. Alongside this, the prevalence of an infinite variety of inexpensive electronic devices that have converged with traditional and new social communication tools has brought communities and shared interest groups ever closer together.

Historically, knowledge has been equated with power which there was a common saying "knowledge is power" in the Renaissance period (Brown, 1989), and has thus been tightly held. However, in the new 'wiki-world', knowledge is truly democratised; the sharing of it is the rule, not the exception. As long as one has a computer or smartphone, or access to one, you can be connected with the entire 'flat' world and with the powerful, free and ever-growing bodies of detailed knowledge on virtually every imaginable subject.

This coincidence of technologies has produced a powerful force in world of public participation, activism and the projection of the community's voice. The 2011 the so-called Arab Spring demonstrated the brutal effectiveness of social media, which activated mass public support almost instantly for protests throughout the Middle East. Although the consequences of these social media efforts are comparatively new topics of interest, the potential of this potent cocktail of traditional and social media as a driving force in social and community engagement can be clearly seen.

## **Social Media in Hong Kong**

In Hong Kong, according to the Office of the Communications Authority (February 2012), the penetration rate of mobile phone subscribers is 212.3%, meaning that for every man, woman, child and baby in the region of just over seven million people, there are 2.1 mobile phones in use. Hong Kong is not an atypical example. The penetration rate of household broadband reaches 86.7% in February 2012. No one can imagine Facebook can build a strong power in the whole world. The total number of Facebook active users reaches more than 900 million in the world (Hachman, 2012) and the number of Facebook users in Hong Kong is 3.7 million, which is half of the Hong Kong population, which shows that social media have high influence to the society.

### **Consumptive Sharing**

Coupled with this staggering penetration rate is the fact that Generation Y is more willing than its predecessors to share all types of information, from what they consumed for breakfast to which fashion trends to consume, without fear of the long-term consequences. They are the archetypical early adopters of social media and the hardware that drives it.

Beyond this 'consumptive sharing', Generation Y has expanded social media's range and usefulness. They now frequently use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and MSN messenger to both share and 'group share' their opinions regarding government, community planning, development and infrastructure projects through specific social groups formed on these social media platforms.

It is noteworthy that these types of social groups have a significant and almost immediate influence on the community, particularly in relation to major infrastructure projects using the community's (taxpayers)' money. For instance, in Hong Kong, social media celebrities have already been created. In 2010, Christina Chan, a young, local, Internet-savvy activist, aroused 'front page' public attention via Facebook in her successful call for project opponents to come forward and surround Hong Kong's Legislative Complex in protest of the construction of a multi-billion dollar high-speed rail link between Hong Kong and its Mainland China neighbour, Guangzhou.

Aside from individual activists, green groups and opponents of specific projects have also used social media to share and rapidly multiply their points of view on other infrastructure projects in Hong Kong. International green group World Wildlife Fund (WWF) launched an email petition campaign in Hong Kong in opposition of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminal

site project as early as 2007. Over 20,000 petition signatures were submitted during the formal EIA public consultation period.

### **Opposition Multiplier**

In addition to this type of online petition campaign, basic ‘Opposition Multiplier’, other development opponents in Hong Kong have successfully organised, well-subscribed, online special interest groups to orchestrate oppositional voices against private sector projects. In a 2011 case, a Facebook-based group built strong opposition to a combined marina, hotel and residential development. This group's Internet profile aroused strong and adverse media attention on the issue and was able to direct its views to both the government and relevant town planning authorities. In the end opposition successfully opposed that project stage. This case demonstrates that social media should be regarded as a rapid response ‘Opinion-Amplifier’ that is able to quickly raise the volume of oppositional voices in conventional media, such as print, TV and radio news.

In point of fact, social media in Hong Kong is beginning to be considered not merely a project irritant or development impediment, but philosophically as ‘A Complaint is a Gift’ by increasing numbers of project proponent and most governments bodies. Be they public or private developers, when enlightened with diverse public opinions, project proponents can use this tide of opinion to modify their planning and to welcome participation in project development.

### **Over-sharing**

If this rise in social media engagement is paired with face-to-face meetings, public forums and roving exhibitions, proponents can be informed, almost in real time, to details they have overlooked in terms of local knowledge or concern. It is never quite this simplistic, however. In recent years, controversial topics have arisen from the social media in Hong Kong, such as the development of an entirely new cultural district. In this case, the arts authority behind the project was accused of “Over-Sharing” and, remarkably, “Too Much” conventional consultation, as it lacked the ability to consolidate these traditional approaches with ideas from the social media sphere.

In the same vein, monitoring opposing opinions through social media is an important component, but it should not be seen as a replacement for face-to-face dialogue in public engagement. What is needed is the ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears paradigm’: not too much, not too little, but just right. The days of ‘proponent Monologue’, in which proponents simply attempt to ‘sell’ their project without the accommodation of public opinion, is no longer workable.

In the campaign of “Link the taste”, which was a Facebook page, launched by The Link Management Limited in Hong Kong was originally a successful campaign to call out people’s memory. (Link the Distastes: Netizens lambasted the Link REIT’ s latest promotion on nostalgic taste “Link the Tastes” , 2012) They want to promote their malls with the local theme with promotion on Facebook. However, some “Netizens” discovered that the comments were conceivably made by people from the management company. It backfired and people accuse them of killing the local characters on Facebook and forums. The campaign was halted.

## **Broadcasting tool**

Social media is a highly effective and free 'broadcasting tool' that has the ability to mobilise people quickly, even immediately; an almost immediate 'digital' call to arms.

Generation Y is IT savvy, and they value the 'The Time is Now' of the instant social context social media provides. It is essential for government and private sector project proponents to understand this and to catch up with their oppositional forces by better utilising social media themselves to promote development and infrastructure projects so as to make their projects more reflective of the aspirations and wishes of local community and special interest groups, increasingly reflected in 'social space'.

## **Social Media in China**

Turning the public participation lens toward development projects in Mainland China, such participation is at a starting point since its citizens do not enjoy the levels of openness apparent in Hong Kong, Europe and the USA, but there is evidence of a new community willingness to comment on public works. The case of the "nail house" in Chongqing (Datong, 2007) demonstrates the rise of social media in China. A photograph of a nail house, a home belonging to someone who refuses to give up his or her home in favour of new development, was posted by a Chinese blogger on 26 February 2007. No one, not even the Chinese blogger, could foresee that one photograph would singlehandedly captivate the attention of media in China and from around the world.

The public supported the owner of the house through social media for standing firm on their legal rights and not moving out of the house. This was the first case of its type in China, as no single citizen had ever felt before that they held enough power to challenge a dispute with the government. Although the 'nail house' was demolished in the end, the event demonstrated the embryo of rising power of public opinion in China. Undoubtedly, the use of social media in this manner will surely continue to increase as China develops.

## **Social Licence**

Going forward, the use of social media in conjunction with other public engagement devices will be what grants a social licence coined by Ian Thomson, Robert G. Boutilier in 2011 (defined as a licence rooted in the beliefs, perceptions and opinions held by stakeholders and the local public (i.e., community permission) (Common Ground Consultants Inc, 2012)) for public and private sector development plans globally. In the absence of such a social licence, projects are much more likely to be opposed and defeated. We already know that properly executed public engagement is the best tool for balancing the various opinions of society and, thus, gaining an appropriate social permission. However, social media needs to be immediately recognised as a powerful catalytic facilitation device to organise and rapidly share stakeholders' ideas and opinions.

## Conclusion

It is not a replacement for conventional face-to-face dialogue-based participation, but a ‘salt and pepper condiment’ to be used in a complementary manner with conventional communication and engagement tools to enhance public participation.

To conclude the sheer scale and the power of social media can be shown a mere 12 minutes, around 45 thousand of photos were uploaded to Flickr, 600 million pages viewed on Google, 55 million hours were viewed on Facebook and over eight million of messages were sent by using WhatsApp SMS service. Social media is not a replacement for conventional face-to-face dialogue-based participation but it is a ‘salt and pepper condiment’. Without doubt, the use of social media can magnify public participation and act as a effective conventional communication and engagement tool.

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