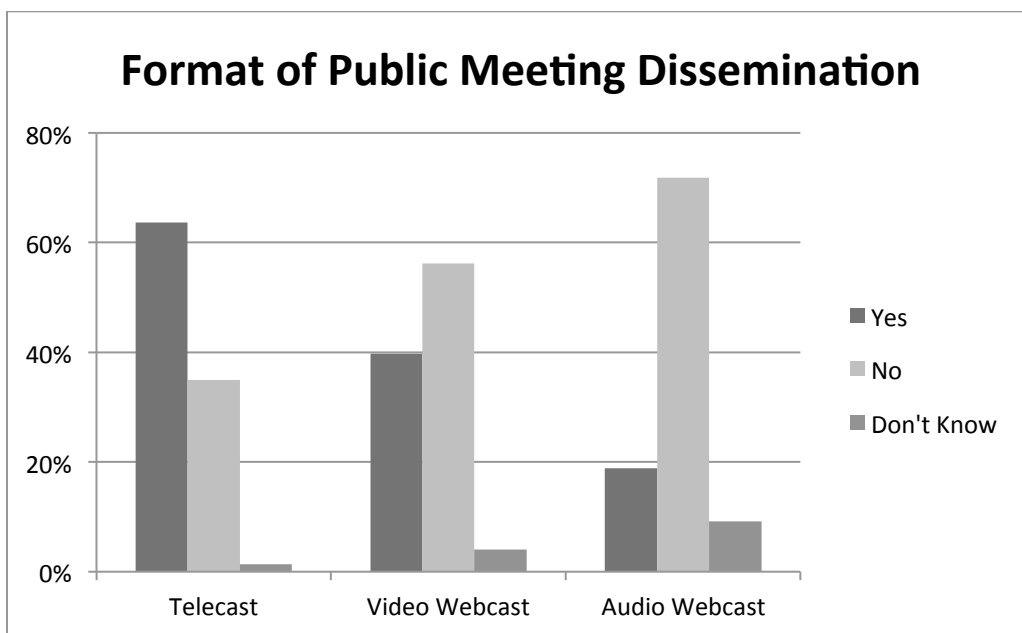


Catching Up to TV: Local Governments Streaming Public Meeting on Web

By: George D. Martin

Four years ago, Betsy Hartner wrote on AmericanCityandCounty.com that “streaming video is coming of age... [and] local government websites are hosting live and on-demand videos of public meetings.” Results from a recent study echo this statement, finding that a sizeable portion of American municipalities are bringing the public forum into the homes of constituents via the Internet. However, television remains the leading mode of broadcasting public meetings in local government.

While 40% of local government managers reported that their government broadcasts video webcasts of key decision meetings, over 60% said the meetings were aired on television and less than one-fifth of provided audio *webcasts* of public meetings.



Sponsored by the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement and conducted by the Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Department of Public Administration, the project surveyed 902 managers from municipalities ranging in population from 25,000 to 250,000 in 50 states.

Video Webcasts and Telecasts in Local Government ¹			
		Telecast	
		Yes	No
Video Webcast	Yes	37.5%	1.7%
	No	22.6%	33.4%

¹ Results do not add up to 100% because “Don’t Know” responses are excluded.

Though television is still the dominant form of broadcasting public meetings, it is increasingly being coupled with online efforts. A comparison of telecasts and video webcasts shows that the highest proportion of cities (37.5%) uses both forms of dissemination and the smallest number (1.7%) employ only video webcasts. This suggests that cities view video webcasts as a compliment to television, rather than a replacement.

At 33%, a substantial number of cities do not broadcast any public meetings to constituents. Yet increasing demand for these online services has spurred the emergence of a niche market. Companies that provide technology consulting services to local governments are promoting themselves as experts in streaming technologies. For example, the website of San Francisco based Granicus, Inc. boasts of “251,231 archived webcasts currently streaming from 745 government agencies.” Similarly, Utah’s SIRE Technologies offers streaming services for cities of all sizes, even those with populations under 25,000.

Proponents of web-based dissemination of public meetings argue that citizens previously disengaged with their local government now have a convenient way of tracking decisions by elected and bureaucratic officials. In the past, a single father working two jobs or an elderly citizen with limited mobility had two resources for viewing public meetings: struggle to attend the meeting in person or find a time when the meeting is broadcast on a local cable television station. Web-based services allow citizens the freedom to choose when and where they catch-up on decisions in their municipality. In addition, steaming audio and video can often be searched, allowing viewers to pinpoint specific issues of interest.

There is some alarm that allowing citizens the freedom to view only specific parts of meetings narrows the public’s understanding of their local government as a whole. Whereas citizens attending a city council meeting for a particular reason would sit through discussions of a variety of topics, the web-based format allows individuals to skip the coverage of seemingly mundane issues that might actually be important.

These concerns seem to have little effect on local governments, however; as the study shows, streaming public meetings online has become a popular electronic tool in America’s municipalities.

Sources:

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