

Connecting with Technology: Frequency of Electronic Engagement in Local Governments

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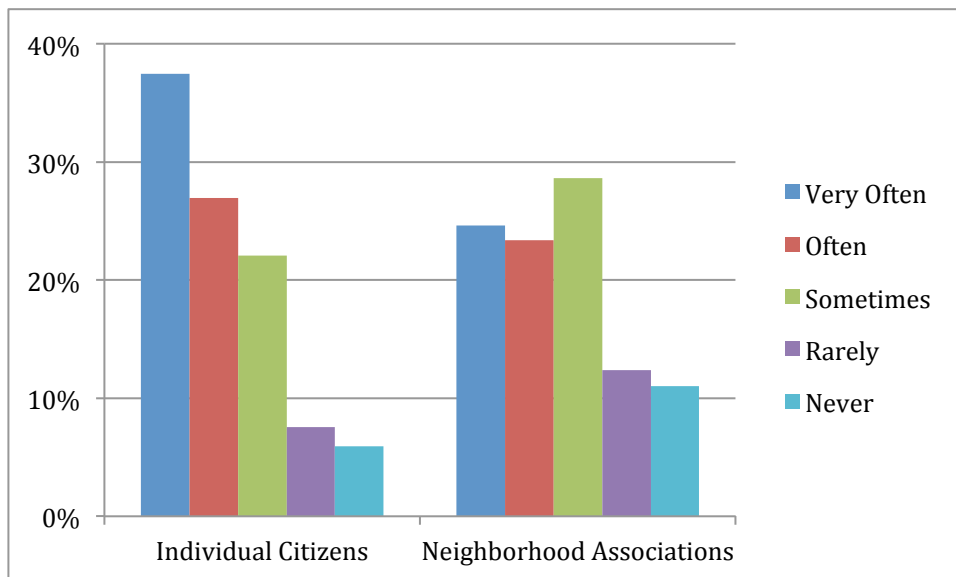
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Synopsis

This analysis explores how local government officials perceive the frequency in which online technologies enable them to engage citizens, professional groups, their own government, and other governments. Using data from a 2010 national survey of local government managers sponsored by the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement (IPCE), we examine the perceptions of local government officials with regards to how often online tools and technology are used to engage different stakeholders.

This study asked 902 managers in the mayor’s office, police department, community/economic development department, finance department, and parks and recreation departments in 500 cities across the U.S. how often electronic technology is used to connect with stakeholder groups including individual citizens, neighborhood associations, news media, interest groups, consultants, professional associations, members of the respondent’s department, other city departments, the city mayor, the Governor’s office within the city’s state, the state legislature, and federal government agencies.

Chart 1: Frequency of Technology use to Engage Citizens and Neighborhood Groups



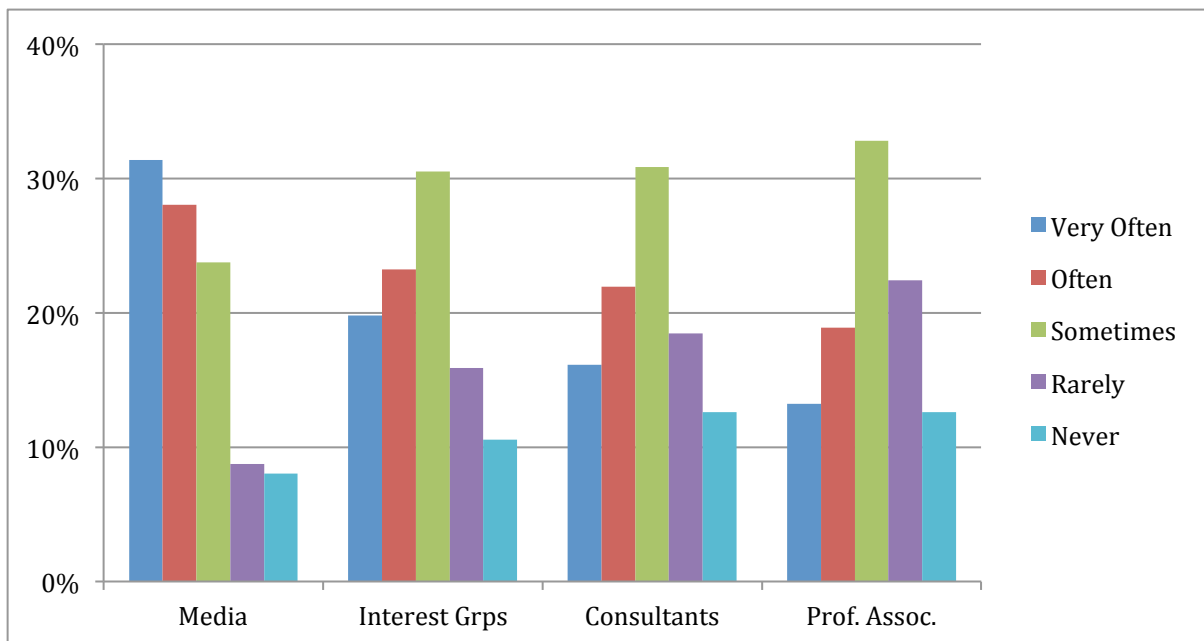
Frequency of Engagement with Citizens and Citizen Groups

This questionnaire asked respondents *"During the last year, how often did your organization use electronic technologies to enable the following citizens and stakeholder groups to participate in government activities and events?"* Chart 1 shows responses with regard to enabling participation among citizens and neighborhood groups. Chart 1 indicates that local government managers generally use technology to engage individual citizens more often than neighborhood associations. About a third of managers say they use technology to garner participation from individual citizens "very often," and another quarter answered "often." Less than 10% of respondents replied that technology was used either "rarely" or "never" to connect to individual citizens. In contrast, the most common answer for the frequency electronic technology is used to connect to neighborhood associations was "sometimes" at 29%. This is most likely the result of some agencies not being particularly connected to neighborhood associations, for example finance departments. Although there is no clear dominant trend for frequency of engagement with neighborhood associations, far fewer respondents answered "rarely" or "never" than the other three options. Clearly, engagement through technology with individual citizens occurs more frequently than with neighborhood associations.

Frequency of Engagement with Professional Stakeholders

Chart 2 shows the frequency with which local government managers use electronic technologies to connect with professional stakeholders including the news media, interest groups, consultants, and professional associations. Overall we see that the pattern of frequency is similar for the latter three groups, with the most common response being "sometimes", while local government managers overwhelmingly respond that connections to the news media occur "very often."

Chart 2: Frequency of Technology use to Engage Professional Groups

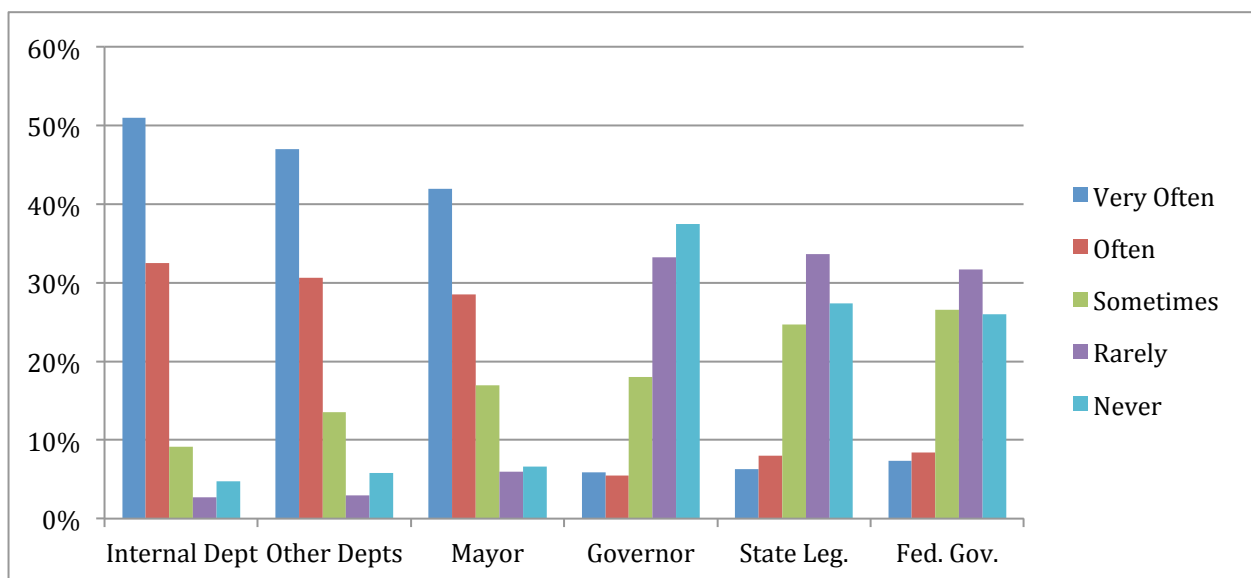


According to this study, professional associations seem to be the least engaged through electronic technologies, with 35% of respondents reporting that they “rarely” or “never” use electronic technologies to connect to professional associations. Among respondents 26%, 31%, and 35% report that they rarely or never connect with interest groups, consultants, and professional associations, respectively. This indicates an opportunity for expanding technology-based interactions with these stakeholders. In comparison, local government managers report high levels of electronic technology use in media relations, with a third of respondents indicating that they “very often” connect with news media. The high use of technology to engage news media may be an indicator of the media’s key role in relaying information to the public. It might also point to the importance of media in local governments. However, it may also signal that local governments underestimate their own capability to inform citizens and delegate most of that responsibility to the news media.

Frequency of Technology Use to Engage Governments

The frequency of technology used to interact with different government groups is shown in Chart 3. The three sets of columns to the left show the frequency of interaction with other groups within local government including the internal department, other city departments, and the mayor’s office. The three sets of columns to the right show frequency of interaction with the governor’s office, state legislature, and federal government. In general, the pattern of responses show that electronic technologies are used often in communication within the city government and much less often (or rarely) with government institutions outside of the city. Engagement within a respondent’s own department scored highest, with over 50% of managers reporting that electronic technology is used “very often” and another 32% reporting “often.” In contrast, local government managers report little interaction with the Governor’s office; “rarely” and “never,” the two leading responses for this group, combined for nearly 70% of responses.

Chart 3: Frequency of Technology Use to Engage Governments



There are several possible explanations for the gap between reported technology to participate with a manager's own government and government outside of the city. First, differences in the extent of interaction probably provide some explanation. We would expect that municipal managers would have more electronic communications within their own departments and others within in the city as compared to organizations outside of the city. Consequently, managers are more likely to use electronic technology to enable participation with groups in their own government. Another possibility is that intergovernmental relations are more formalized, requiring face-to-face meetings for collaboration and hard copy documents for official requests. Whatever the case, the divide in electronic participation is clear. Less clear is whether or not there is room for more intergovernmental electronic technology engagement.

Conclusions

The analysis presented here illustrates the ways in which local governments are using technology to enable participation with various stakeholders. As stakeholders move further away from the local government - from citizens and media to state and federal government – we see a decrease in using technology to enable participation. Moreover, the majority of responses for almost all groups are neither “very often” nor “never,” meaning that most local government managers report a moderate level of enabling electronic participation rather than one of the extremes.

While there is clearly frequent interaction with some groups (in particular citizens and local government), there is room to expand these initiatives, especially with regard to state and federal governments and professional associations. While this research cannot assess whether the low frequency of technological engagement with these groups is a sign of a lack of engagement in general or simply a lack of technology use for engagement, it may be the case that local governments only provide space for technological participation with the stakeholder groups that consistently bring concerns and ideas to the table. It is possible that groups that only periodically interact with the municipality require less capacity for technological engagement. Many interest groups, for example, are concerned with only one issue that may arise on a city's agenda occasionally. Similarly, municipal relationships with higher levels of government sometimes revolve around financial issues, where there may be decades-old systems of in-person interaction. Whatever the case, local government managers are clearly using technology to enable the participation of the groups closest to them, namely intra-governmental actors, individual citizens, and the news media.

About the Data

The analysis uses data from a web survey on e-government technology and civic engagement conducted by the Science, Technology and Environmental Policy Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago and supported by IPCE. The survey was administered to government managers in 500 local governments with citizen populations ranging from 25,000 to 250,000. Because larger cities often have greater financial and technical capacity for e-government, all 184 cities with a population over 100,000 were selected while a proportionate random sample of

316 out of 1,002 communities was drawn from cities with populations under 100,000. For each city, lead managers were identified in each of the following five departments: general city management, community development, finance, the police, and parks and recreation. A total of 2,500 city managers were invited to take part in the survey. The survey began on August 2, 2010 and closed on October 11, 2010. A total of 902 responses were received for a final response rate of 37.9%.¹

¹ The population size was reduced to 2380 after removing bad addresses and individuals who are not longer working in the position.