My paper “Citizen Participation and the Internet in Urban Planning” contains citations to the historical content reviewed here.

Internet Participation in Planning: Historical Context and a Framework for Discussion
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1. Introduction

I'd like to begin today with a couple quotes about citizen participation in urban planning. The first comes from early in the 20th Century:

"Promotion ... is the dynamic power behind the throne of [urban planning] accomplishment." - Walter Dwight Moody, around 1910

The second is from later, in 1969:

"The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you." - Sherry R. Arnstein

These quotes reflect two moments in the history of participation in urban planning in America. I want to speak for a few minutes about a few critical periods in participation. The history of participation is relevant to us for several reasons: it explains the legal structures in which we work, forms the basis of social norms and expectations in society, and finally can be a source of inspiration for the professional today. We should each consider whether participation is the power behind our thrones, spinach on our plates, or some other metaphor.

2. Two Periods in Planning Participation History

I will start with perhaps the most famous urban plan. At the turn of the Century Chicago was growing extremely rapidly, and experiencing the related problems of pollution, transportation, water quality, and the like. In response to these problems, a private organization of business and civic elites commissioned the creation of a city plan. The primary author, architect Daniel Burnham, created a wide-ranging plan proposing, among other things, a monumental civic center, new parks along the waterfront, and a system of street widenings throughout the city.

The plan was accepted by the city council, who established an official city plan commission to implement it. The Chicago Plan Commission sought the help of Walter Dwight Moody to publicize the plan. Under his leadership, the group spearheaded a comprehensive outreach effort to win the hearts and minds of Chicagoans. The plan was distilled into a textbook that was required reading in the city's schools for 8th graders, selected to be young enough to inculcate with their ideas. A 90-page bound book summarizing the plan was sent to all property owners
and tenants paying over $25 in rent, a documentary movie was created and screened with slide shows, a plan to encourage the city’s clergy to speak about it during on Sunday’s sermons, and more. These efforts bore fruit in positive electoral results of the bond and ballot initiatives for plan elements. This propaganda can be explained by the lack of any formal authority to achieve these by the city or plan holders. Planning began as an extra-governmental enterprise. This happens today, recently I read an article in Planning magazine about a community sustainability plan where the city planners weren't involved, and many of us here have been involved in private initiatives with public ambitions.

I should explain Walter Dwight Moody had the view planning had two parts. The first, a technical and design phase where experts created the plan. The second was the phase of promotion, to convince the city of the plan’s value.

In the decade after the creation of the Plan of Chicago, communities across the U.S. begin various planning initiatives, however it’s unclear if cities actually have the power to implement them, in particular exercise land use authority. The issue was settled in 1926 when the Supreme Court ruled in Euclid v. Ambler that zoning was in fact legitimate under the town’s police power to safeguard the health, safety, and welfare.

All that remained for the widespread adoption of planning and zoning was the state’s to pass planning and zoning enabling acts, which would devolve the state’s police powers in this area to the local municipalities. To encourage this to happen, the U.S. Department of Commerce published standard zoning and planning enabling acts in 1926 and 1928. Responding to concerns about the constitutionality of planning, they carefully proscribe public notice and public hearings to satisfy the constitution's due process requirement. However, buried in a footnote in the planning act remains a glimmer of an older, more propagandistic approach to public engagement, which reads:

The public hearing previous to the adoption of the plan or substantial part thereof has at least two values of importance. One of these is that those who are or may be dissatisfied with the plan, for economic, sentimental, or other reasons, will have the opportunity to present their objections and thus get the satisfaction of having their objections produce amendments which they desire, or at least the feeling that their objections have been given courteous and thorough consideration. The other great value of the public hearing is as an educating force; that is, it draws the public’s attention to the plan, cause some members of the public to examine it, to discuss it, to hear about it, and gets publicity upon the plan and planning. Thus the plan begins its life with some public interest in it and recognition of its importance.

This educating function has remained an afterthought at best in many processes. The standard acts, and most state laws, mandated hearings and notices in the municipal gazette and newspaper of public records. Advocates for participation would do well to read their state's laws and see how local planning work is limited and what participation is mandated. Most states, including
Maryland and Massachusetts, have laws that closely mimic these enabling acts, however some are quite different, such as Washington and Florida.

These laws, and local cultures, form the background framework for planning in the postwar period. For many urban renewal projects there’s no attempts made to go any further than newspaper notices, hearings, and a vote of the legislative body.

The next period was the one that produced the spinach quote. The key legislation in President Johnson administration's war on poverty made federal funding available to local Community Action Agencies. The idea was local groups would know what was needed and could use it on a wide range of programs to alleviate policies. The law simply required the local group create their plan with the “maximum feasible participation” of the target population.

You may be able to imagine what happened next: large amounts of federal funds going to local groups given an undefined mandate to involve the local populace. The result, particularly in big cities, was intense political struggles over who should be on the CAA and how much participation was sufficient. The title of a book by Daniel Patrick Moynihan about the law suggests how successful it was: Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding. After much debate and chaos, the term was eventually defined to be 1/3 of the community action agency board by representative of poor. Shortly afterwards, Congress passed a law allowing local elected officials to appoint the CAA boards, and not too much longer the funds were converted to Community Development Block Grants.

I argue this episode was a reaction from urban renewal and established the expectation that minority and disadvantaged communities deserve extra attention. It is also related to a range of federal laws that established guidelines for participation.

Let’s fast forward to today. The American Planning Association’s statement of ethical principles adopted in 1992 specifically addressing citizen participation: “Recognize the rights of citizens to participate in planning decisions, strive to give citizens (including those who lack formal organization or influence) full, clear and accurate information on planning issues and the opportunity to have a meaningful role in the development of plans and programs,” and also, "ensure that reports, records, and any other non-confidential information which is, or will be available to decision makers is made available to the public in a convenient format and sufficiently in advance of any decision.” I'll point out professionally certified planners are held responsible for these, so presumably could face professional censor for not following them. Our approaches and techniques for participation have proliferated widely, and there’s a cottage industry of consultants who will set up websites, newsletters, open houses, dot exercise, electronic keypad voting, and other techniques for participation.

3. The Internet

Now I want to shift gears from a historical perspective to a contemporary one. These brief remarks introduce several issues to consider in our discussions of technology and participation.

I think as a communications medium the Internet has three defining characteristics: it is
ubiquitous, interactive, and instantaneous. I’ll briefly describe what I mean and connect these to what I see as some major issues for us to consider over the next few days.

First, the web is ubiquitous, more or less, globally. The issue this introduces is that of access and equity. Some discuss the “digital divide,” but I fear this is a simplifying, political term, that I’d hope to replace. The Pew Internet and American Life Project asks Americans how often they use the web or send email “at least occasionally,” and they found in December 2008:

- 74% total adults use the internet at least occasionally
- 41% of people 65 and older
- 87% of people 18-29
- 35% with less than high school education
- 95% with College degrees
- 57% of households with less than $30,000
- 94% of households earning $75,000+
- 77% of whites
- 64% of blacks
- 58% of Hispanics

Interestingly, this data shows the “divide” by age and education is actually deeper than by race or income. In fact, it’s surprising that a majority of the poorest households in the study were online.

I think we need to talk about three continuums: Internet access, technical skill or literacy, and finally motivation. Together these interact to form the participation gap observed online, but we should be aware our conventional methods can be unrepresentative. Here is one author of a detailed study of environmental justice in New York City: “[the public participation process in New York City] is complicated, convoluted, time-consuming, and intimidating … has helped to maintain the hegemony of the affluent and the non-minority population.” So in order to address this concern, we should be concerned with a range of issues related to Internet access, technical skill and literacy, and motivation to participate, including rural broadband, internet access in community centers and libraries, web usability, human/computer interface design, language translation, plain language initiatives, and how issues are framed and presented.

Second, the web is interactive. Or more precisely it can be very interactive or not interactive – a broadcast medium. This flexibility makes it so complex and is the power of Web 2.0 websites. The issue this raises is that of moderation or structuring dialogue so important to planning efforts. We have to allow for collaboration while recognizing individual viewpoints. I’m not convinced we’ve exhausted what is possible at blog comments, discussion forums, as an example like Digg-style ratings systems have great promise. On a spectrum of interaction I think sometimes we get excited and go for something too open – a wiki – or to closed, and don’t appreciate the rich intermediate options.

Third, the internet is instantaneous, globally. When something goes up, it’s live. This also means
it is spatially universal. I started a website about local planning in College Park, Maryland we found we had majority local readers, but some elsewhere – moved away or retained connection to the community. Locally specific signs, meetings, and media made this a non-issue previously, but it will become increasingly a concern. We will have to address the issue of how to define the communities we serve, and geographically fixed concepts like residency and voting status will carry less meaning in very mobile society.

Separate from the medium of the Internet there are some important general issues we should consider.

What is the relationship between politics, information, and planning? Will what we do reinforce existing power dynamics, empower the powerless, or are they neutral? The assumption of the sunshine and open government movement is making the information available is inherently a good thing. Many planning professionals are deeply skeptical of this, and have the vague sense if we make data more open it will just empower elites, deepening inequality.

What do we mean by participation? Arnstein poses what she calls a ladder or participation. Except every rung is critical – the bottom rungs are manipulation, some are just listening, or placating, and only the top rung, citizen power, is really valid. The simple fact is our laws reserve final decisions to elected representatives so it’s not easy or possible to do what she wants. I think she has a very polarizing view of participation. Although we may be positive about it, there's an interesting article about the unanticipated effects of participation: it allows a vocal minority to get their way, perhaps over the general or public interest. This is the source of the bitterness many planners who have open distain for public meetings.

What is the relationship between planning and the media. Does the changing media landscape change our approaches? Should we return to a model pioneered one hundred years ago where we go to the people? I proposed to the Massachusetts zoning reform task force that they should require notices be published on town websites not just in city hall and in the newspaper. They didn't go for it - but I'm not going anywhere.

Finally, what are the outcomes we are looking for? Better cities, the ethic of democracy, reduced litigation? And at what cost? Given competing demands and limited resources, how should we define minimum standards and establish goals. How should participation at the local level reconcile idea models with limited resources?

Thank you and I look forward to a lively conversation.