Assessing Civic Tech:

Case Studies and Resources for Tracking Outcomes

March 2015

Knight Foundation

NETWORK IMPACT

Introduction

Knight Foundation launched the Tech for Engagement initiative in 2010 to experiment with new civic technologies and tools that spur citizen engagement, improve cities and make government more effective. Knight has invested over $25 million in nearly fifty projects since that time, ranging from neighborhood forums like Front Porch Forum, to civic crowdfunding platforms like neighbor.ly, to efforts that promote government innovation like Code for America.

The field of civic tech has grown dramatically with a proliferation of new technologies connecting residents in neighborhoods, catalyzing community discussions, changing the way governments and citizens interact, and making government more transparent. These efforts have different goals, strategies and scopes, but all of them offer new tools to inspire people to take action. A recent landscape analysis supported by Knight, entitled The Emergence of Civic Tech, uncovered 241 organizations that received a combination of private and philanthropic funding totaling $695 million between 2011 and 2013. The breadth of activity and investment captured in the report triggered lively discussions about next steps for this growing movement, but the most common question was this: **How do we capture insights into the effectiveness of new civic tech tools and measure their impact?**

Practitioners in this expanding field are already tracking progress using metrics such as number of active users, and most organizations are familiar with tools like Google Analytics. But measuring the impact of civic tech means more than counting clicks, views, downloads and tweets. It also means tracking on-the-ground outcomes for people, places and processes.

Knight Foundation engaged Network Impact to conduct a scan of the field of civic tech assessment and provide technical assistance to several grantees. This resource summarizes assessment approaches, tools and case studies that Network Impact identified and developed through their extensive research and consultations with thought leaders in the field.

Civic tech is a growing field that harnesses technology to spur citizen engagement, improve cities and make government more effective.
This guide includes advice for civic tech designers and managers on how to monitor and assess the impact of their innovations.

About Network Impact
Network Impact accelerates and spreads the development and use of networks to support positive social change. We conduct research, build tools and provide strategy and evaluation advice to social-impact networks, foundations, and an emerging field of network builders. Find us at: www.networkimpact.org

Emerging Practice for Measuring Key Civic Tech Outcomes

How do you know if activity on your platform is leading to the outcomes you want? Are neighbors connecting and collaborating to address civic issues? Are public decision-making processes more transparent, efficient and inclusive? Are residents and government officials more trusting of each other? Has the delivery of government services improved?

If you are new to tracking outcomes, take a step back and think about how your platform works toward change within the ecosystem of people and places around it. Then imagine how change might occur as a result of your efforts. This process, known as a Theory of Change, provides a solid foundation for assessment and can also help you describe your vision to partners and funders. (See Additional Tools and Resources for more information on Developing a Theory of Change).

The term "platform" is used throughout this guide to refer to any civic tech project, whether it is a mobile app or a multi-feature website.

Following are common civic tech objectives:

- **Build place-based social capital**
- **Increase civic engagement**
- **Promote deliberative democracy**
- **Support open governance**
- **Foster inclusion and diversity**

The subsequent pages describe key civic tech outcomes for each of these objectives, along with examples of assessments from the field.

TOP TIPS

Best practices for assessment include:

- **measures that focus on your primary civic tech objective**
- **comparison of results for different types of users** (e.g., super-users, users from different demographic groups, etc.)
- **analysis of platform data in combination with other sources of information** (e.g., user surveys). Find more information about gathering and analyzing data from multiple sources here.

Stop right there! Where are you going with my data?

Like all good relationships, your relationship with your users is built on trust. When collecting and analyzing user data, consider security and privacy implications. If you gather personal information, make sure that users know how the information will be used. You will find more resources on the ethical use of data in Additional Tools & Resources.

Objective:
Build place-based social capital

Users are more informed about people, places and issues in their community

Metric: Percent of users with increased knowledge about community issues as a result of platform use.

For example, 1,400 of 4,000 total users have increased their knowledge about issues in their community as a result of their participation on the platform.

Baseline %	Current %	% Change Since Last Year
28%	35%	↑ 7%

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Find sample survey questions related to Building Place-Based Social Capital here.

The **Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey** was created jointly by 36 community foundations, other funders and the Saguaro Seminar of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The survey examines the extent to which Americans are connected to family, friends, neighbors and civic institutions, on a local and national level. These connections – known collectively as Social Capital – serve as the glue that holds communities together.

What this looks like

Building place-based social capital includes connecting residents in small, bounded communities (e.g., neighborhoods, towns) so that they can strengthen their social relationships, learn more about their place, and engage in the everyday life of their community.

You're making progress if:

- users' social networks are denser and bonds between neighbors are stronger
- users are more informed about people, places and issues in their community
- users increasingly feel that their neighborhood/city/town is a desirable place to live
- users engage more fully in the everyday life of their community (e.g., volunteer, support their neighbors, start or join a local initiative, etc.)

Case example

Front Porch Forum creates regional networks of online forums to help neighbors in Vermont connect and build community. In 2008, an external researcher conducted a user survey to get a better understanding of the potential of the platform. Key findings included:

- 90% think Front Porch Forum improves their neighborhood
- 78% feel that Front Porch Forum makes their neighborhood more "neighborly"
- 77% think Front Porch Forum is a good place to voice their opinion
- 93% feel more civically engaged since joining Front Porch Forum

In 2014, Front Porch Forum followed up with another user survey that asked Front Porch Forum members to answer two-part questions about their experiences, before and after joining the forum. Asking these questions allowed Front Porch Forum to get a better sense of changes in user attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and how these might correlate to platform use. Major findings from their survey results include:

- 24% more members have neighbors over to their home monthly
- Four times more members feel "very informed" about opportunities to get involved locally
- About one-third more members work to make change in their local communities monthly
- 38% more members attend local public meetings monthly
- 33% more members contact local public officials monthly

Taken together, these surveys help to validate Front Porch Forum's approach, their goals and their value proposition. You can read the full results of their survey on the Front Porch Forum blog.

Objective: Increase civic engagement

Users engage more fully in civic life
Metric: Percent of users who took a civic action of some kind (e.g., vote, volunteer, contacted an elected official, participated or led a civic initiative) as a result of platform use.
For example, 3,400 of 8,000 total users report that they took a civic action as a result of their participation on the platform.

Baseline %	Current %	% Change Since Last Year
18%	43%	↑ 25%

What this looks like

Increasing civic engagement includes providing people with information and opportunities to engage with others in their community and participate in public decision making.

You're making progress if:

- users feel more confident in their ability to influence conditions in their community
- users engage more fully in civic life (e.g., vote, volunteer, lead a civic initiative, etc.)

Case example

ioby.org is a community of donors, volunteers and leaders dedicated to making urban neighborhoods stronger and more sustainable. A crowd-resourcing platform for citizen-led, neighbor-funded community projects, ioby combines the ability to pool small online donations to a specific cause and engage activists and advocates to ensure the success of the project. Success at ioby is defined as providing resources to ioby Leaders to accelerate their visions for change. Currently, ioby is tracking physical and social changes in the neighborhoods of ioby projects as well as changes in the capacity of ioby Leaders. Using surveys and interviews with Leaders, ioby is also improving their own operations and creating studies that document environmental outcomes in these places. A highlight from ioby studies involved the Newark Neighborhood of South Ward which raised $4,000 for the expansion of their Agri-Garden and the cultivation of a new 5,000 square foot lot. The additional space allowed them to triple their farming capacity and produce more than 4,500 pounds of food.

Related Civic Tech Assessment

The goal of **ACTion Alexandria** is to provide residents of Alexandria, VA, with online tools to connect to each other and to make community actions easier by serving as a broker between local nonprofits and residents. Their evaluation tapped a variety of data: website data metrics, social media, user survey responses and interviews with community partners. Results of their analysis confirmed that ACTion Alexandria's platform successfully engaged residents in support of local campaigns launched by its nonprofit partners. Results also show that ACTion Alexandria helped residents become more aware of events, services and opportunities for collaboration in their community, solicited increased input from diverse groups and individuals (especially experts) and fostered new collaborations between nonprofits. The full summative evaluation report includes more details on the methodology and a complete list of program impact categories, metrics, outcomes and results. There is also a blog post that explains the process used to create network maps from the evaluation that visualized the online community engagement.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Find sample survey questions related to Increasing Civic Engagement here.

The Online Networked Neighborhoods Study examines three online neighborhood platforms operating in and around London, England. The results show ways that different platforms were able to strengthen social capital, enhance social cohesion, contribute to citizen empowerment and engagement, and build citizens' capacity and willingness to work in cooperation with public services. Evaluation methods included focus groups and interviews with users, platform content analysis, and user surveys.

Objective:
Promote deliberative democracy

Users increasingly hold their governments accountable		
Metric: Percent of users who have contacted an elected official about a policy they care about.		
For example, 7,454 of 18,912 total users report they have contacted an elected official about a policy they care about as a result of their participation on the platform.		
Baseline %	**Current %**	**% Change Since Last Year**
28%	**39%**	**↑11%**

What this looks like

Promoting deliberative democracy includes increasing interaction between public officials and their constituents to debate issues and make decisions through dialogue and community planning.

You're making progress if:

- public officials are better informed about constituents' concerns, needs and values
- public officials are more responsive to needs of citizens
- users vote more frequently as a result of their participation on your platform
- users increasingly hold their governments accountable

Case example

ParliamentWatch, a German platform, creates an environment where users are in direct contact with policymakers and can ask them questions about important issues. Questions can be voted up by other users, and the platform permanently records whether policymakers respond to growing pressure to comment, or not. ParliamentWatch seeks to increase voter engagement in the political process through a new form of democratic participation. On the government side, ParliamentWatch fosters a new form of idea exchange and increased accountability. ParliamentWatch releases an Annual Transparency Report containing its key performance indicators: response rate to questions, number of questions and answers, site visits and donors. As of 2012, the policymakers' response rate across all years of the site's operation was around 80%. In addition, an evaluation team analyzed platform data, questions and responses by users and policymakers, as well as results of key informant interviews and a survey of non-government users. Their assessment found that 95% of German Members of Parliament participate in the platform, 40% of users had never previously contacted a politician, and that the platform promoted more interest in direct democracy – including changes to voting systems in two German states giving voters more say in public decisions. For more information about evaluation methods, refer to the ParliamentWatch evaluation case study: The Communications Architect: Enabling Public Dialog to Advance Democracy.

Related Civic Tech Assessments

Launched in 2014, **AskThem** is a free, open source platform for questions and answers with public figures. It works like the White House's "We the People" platform, but for every U.S. elected official as well as any public figure with a verified Twitter account. AskThem visitors use a a street address to locate an elected official or other public figure to ask a question. The question circulates over email and social media, gathering signatures until a count threshold is reached. The question is then delivered to the official or individual with a request to respond publicly. When an answer is published, everyone who signed the question is notified.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Find sample survey questions related to Promoting Deliberative Democracy here.

"SeeClickFix for Public Participation? Assessing the feasibility of an online platform for evaluating public participation activities" examines online platforms designed to gather, track and analyze data describing public participation. The report, which was produced for the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, includes a literature review of online platforms, current methods of public participation evaluation, commonly used metrics, use of online tools for similar evaluative functions, and tools currently serving similar or related functions.

Over 80 elected officials nationwide and more public figures have volunteered to respond to popular questions, including the mayors of Austin, TX, and Kansas City, MO, and journalists Glenn Greenwald and Chris Hayes. Recent Q&A exchanges include the president of New York University addressing institutional privacy protections in response to a question from a student-led digital rights group and a New York City council member responding to residents concerned about a controversial waste station. Earlier this year, AskThem explored ways to track impact on public engagement through a partnership with the Google Civic Innovation team. They learned that a leading NYC council member, Brad Lander of Brooklyn, introduced legislation for a race and social justice initiative in direct response to a constituent's question on Ask Them.

Community PlanIT is an online game platform that invites community members to try out their ideas and engage in challenges related to a local community planning process. The platform has been used in contexts as varied as youth employment policy in Moldova and Bhutan, urban planning in Philadelphia, health care in Boston, and water quality on Cape Cod. In Detroit 24/7, a version of the game designed in collaboration with Detroit's Long Term Planning Commission, over 1,000 Detroiters engaged with the game, which recorded more than 800 resident comments about their experience with the city and where they thought it should go in future. Analysis of platform data confirmed that Detroit 24/7 met two of its principal goals: it attracted "unusual suspects," including people who had not participated in a planning meeting in the past, and it engaged people from different generations (including a large proportion of players under the age of thirty five.) Data from Detroit 24/7 was made accessible in summary visualizations, such as an interactive map and word cloud so that community groups, advocacy groups, and others could use the platform data wherever they saw the potential.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Deliberation by the numbers – a sampling of statistics from large-scale deliberative projects details actual measures used in various projects, including sample metrics in categories that include: people taking action; more inclusive, collaborative decision-making leading to smarter decisions; costs of public deliberation; and increased knowledge and learning - and as a result in some cases, changes in attitudes.

Building a Deliberation Measurement Toolbox is an academic review of ways to evaluate deliberation, and how to improve methods for evaluating deliberation. The report includes: tested questions for evaluating deliberations; a theoretical framework and directions for further examining deliberation effects; practical advice on how to go about rigorously establishing the effectiveness of deliberation; and guidelines for how to construct your own survey questions.

Objective: Support Open Governance

Users gain trust in government officials		
Metric: Percent of users whose trust in public officials increased as a result of platform use.		
For example, 2,316 of 22,938 total users report that their level of trust in public officials has increased as a result of their participation on the platform.		
Baseline %	**Current %**	**% Change Since Last Year**
6%	10%	↑ 4%

What this looks like

Supporting open government includes fostering public scrutiny and oversight by enabling public access to government data.

You're making progress if:

- users and government officials gain trust in each other
- there is increased support for open governance among public officials
- government becomes more transparent

Case example

Code for America promotes more efficient and transparent approaches to data sharing by city governments and helps governments understand and respond to community needs. To assess their impact, Code for America administers surveys to both Code for America fellows and government partners. They track their influence on the "ecosystem" of open governance by monitoring the number of apps created by fellows and the percentage of those apps that are sustained by municipal administrations. They also track structural changes, like new positions created and new collaborations between government entities or government and community groups. One recent project, Promptly, uses government data to help residents in San Francisco make sure that they do not lose their food stamp benefits because they fail to renew on schedule. Code for America fellows partnered with the city's Human Service Agency (HSA) and the Mayor's Office of Civic Innovation to create an app that alerts food stamp recipients when they are about to lose their benefits. Despite the wide use of cell phones, HSA was the first San Francisco agency to text their clients. Since the app's launch, 50% of clients receiving the Promptly text messages took action to preserve their benefits by calling a phone number they received. HSA has continued to work with Code for America to prototype other text messaging applications related to food security. Together they are building local government capacity to deploy SMS technology and user-centered design practices to improve service provision and access to benefits. In future, they plan to focus on measures of inclusive civic engagement and public participation. Code for America also tracks the number of apps scaled through re-deployment and new versions created, including the number of forked projects on Github – a process for using an existing project as the starting point for another. In 2013, 30 apps were developed, 18 were scaled, and forked projects on Github totaled 3,966.

Related Civic Tech Assessment

Peak Democracy's Open Town Hall is a cloud-based, online civic engagement platform that augments and diversifies public participation. A case study of how the platform was used in Salt Lake City in 2014 to engage residents on a proposed local ordinance demonstrates how resident feedback was incorporated in the form of amendments to the ordinance. The platform's software was able to mitigate outside influence by focusing interactions on residents and their local government.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Find sample survey questions for Supporting Open Governance here.

Toward Metrics for Re(Imagining) Governance: The Promise and Challenge of Evaluating Innovations in How We Govern

This paper offers advice for strengthening the evaluation of governance innovation, including participatory governance and emerging social technologies used in governance.

Objective:
Foster inclusion and diversity

Increase in bridging differences in communities		
Metric: Percent of users who have been introduced to new ideas or points of view as a result of platform use.		
For example, 6,316 of 9,736 total users report that they have been introduced to new ideas or points of view as a result of their participation on the platform.		
Baseline %	**Current %**	**% Change Since Last Year**
46%	**65%**	**↑ 19%**

What this looks like

Fostering inclusion includes promoting respect for differences by making the voices and perspectives of hard-to-reach populations heard as well as connecting people across differences in income, national origin, age, gender, sexual orientation and race/ethnicity.

You're making progress if:

- interactions between users who are different increase
- efforts to bridge differences in communities increase
- civic engagement among low-income, immigrant and other hard-to-reach populations increases (e.g., increased voting and participation in community initiatives)

Case example

E-Democracy connects neighbors to each other through simple online forums as a means to support participation in public life, strengthen communities, and build democracy. They have made recruiting people from diverse, low-income and immigrant communities a priority. A 2011 evaluation of their work tested E-Democracy's hypothesis that if they created an outreach and engagement strategy, they could effectively increase the diversity of forum participants and forum content in two target neighborhoods. The evaluation included interviews with outreach staff, volunteer forum managers, and forum participants, as well as an analysis of forum posts and posters. The research showed that by seeding content on forums and encouraging participation by target users, E-Democracy was able to significantly increase content and participant diversity. Residents also told E-Democracy staff that the forum provided them with new information and alternative viewpoints. E-Democracy has continued to build on their previous work and, in the summer of 2012, a nine-member, part-time outreach team signed up almost 3,000 people across St. Paul, MN. Their targeted outreach led to increases in the diversity of registered members. Over 50% of people who signed up via in-person outreach indicated they were a person of color. In order to determine whether forums have been effective in bridging differences and strengthening connections between users, E-Democracy administered a survey in 2014 that asked its 10,000+ users about their experiences with the forum. The survey found that as a result of information or discussions on the forum 67% of users were introduced to new ideas and views and 32% reported they learned more about neighbors of difference races, ethnicities. More about the survey can be found on the E-Democracy blog.

> "A lot of people, including myself, are concerned that without intentional action, civic tech could empower those already privileged by existing systems, and disenfranchise people already excluded... I think the field is on its way to a better framework and better methods for genuine inclusion – and right along with that we'll need to figure out compelling ways to measure it that developers and the broader field can really use."
>
> TAMIR NOVOTNY
> Senior Associate for
> Public Sector Innovation, Living Cities

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Find sample survey questions related to Fostering Inclusion and Diversity here.

Engagement Tech for All: Best Practices in the Use of Technology in Engaging Underrepresented Communities in Planning is a blog that summarizes research on how civic technologists can reach underrepresented communities. The author notes that while communities are using technology to effectively engage typically underrepresented groups, rigorous evaluation of these efforts has been limited. In many cases, communities need to collect additional data to more accurately determine who is participating, and to meaningfully compare the costs and benefits associated with different tools or outreach methods.

Where do we go from here?

Civic tech assessment is a rapidly evolving field. If you have comments or other examples to share, please let us know. We plan to update our online reference list – Additional Tools & Resources.

Network Impact provides other information and guidance on best practices in civic tech assessment here: www.NetworkImpact.org/CivicTechEval.

Thank you's

Network Impact would like to thank the following organizations for generously sharing their stories and insights: Code for America; Change by Us; Living Cities; Participatory Politics Foundation; CommonPlace; E-Democracy; Community PlanIT; and ACTion Alexandria. Network Impact is also grateful to the following individuals for reviewing a working draft of this guide and contributing to its content: Beth Kanter (Beth's Blog), Tamir Novotny (Living Cities), Frank Hebbert (OpenPlans) and Maria O'Meara (Writer).