Civic Engagement, a Proposed Project

Marian Dörk, mdoerk@ucalgary.ca
Maria Bakardjieva, bakardji@ucalgary.ca
Jonathan Sillito, sillito@ucalgary.ca
University of Calgary

Introduction

Over the next few months, a group of students here at the University of Calgary will be working on a project about *civic engagement*. This short paper describes our plans and motivations for this project.

For people living in a city it can be challenging to know what issues are being discussed at city hall, beyond those sufficiently broad to be reported by mass media. Many local issues, that are important to small numbers of people, for example a proposal to use a particular vacant lot as a community garden, may not make the evening news. We believe that if residents have better ways of becoming aware of current civic issues and coming together with others for whom these issues are important, their level of interest and engagement will increase (Blumler & Coleman, 2001).

On the other hand, it can also be challenging for residents to raise an issue in a way that helps that issue get traction in the community. Contacting a local representative is certainly an option and many cities have mechanisms to allow citizens to register complaints or report problems. However, for issues that are complex and important to a resident, such limited interaction may be unsatisfying and less likely to result in progress. We believe that progress on an issue will be more likely if a resident can easily connect with other interested residents and be more deeply involved in moving an issue forward (Dahlgren, 2009).

The goal of our project is to experiment with ways to more deeply engage residents in the decision making process of their city. To pursue this experiment, over the next few months we plan to create a web application called *CivicConnect*. At it's core, CivicConnect is a system to allow participants inside and outside city hall to discuss issues and collaboratively develop proposals around those issues; both issues currently being discussed at city hall, and issues residents would like to see raised. To this end, both open discussion and structured proposal development (connected to discussion) will be supported. Other aspects of our design aim to help residents become aware of relevant issues and to build an engaged community of participants around each issue.

In the remainder of this paper, we first discuss in some detail the design of our system and conclude with a discussion of open questions we would like to discuss at the *HCI, Politics and the City* workshop.

Raising and Discussing Issues

In our design of CivicConnect we are aiming to support a forum where citizens can discuss issues that are of interest to them. The city of Calgary publishes agendas and minutes from city council meetings (http://agendaminutes.calgary.ca/sirepub/meetresults.aspx) which we anticipate using to collect current issues for potential discussion topics. We will also allow users of CivicConnect to raise additional issues for discussion.

We believe that the tone of the discussion will greatly influence how successful CivicConnect is at encouraging civic engagement. Our thinking on the nature of the discussion we want to encourage has been influenced by principles of *Interest Based Negotiation*, which "focuses on developing mutually beneficial agreements based on the interests of the disputants" (http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/interest-based_bargaining). With these principles in mind we will be exploring different mechanisms to encourage constructive discussion. Mechanisms under consideration include providing discussion guidelines, implementing a points based system for participants, and involving moderators in some way.

Developing Proposals

As issues are discussed and, in particular, once participants have been able to express their interests (needs, concerns, hopes, etc), we would like CivicConnect to support them in exploring solutions based on those interests. This exploration will be in the form of *proposals* that address a particular issue and possibly summarizes key parts of the discussion. We expect that creating these proposals will be a collaborative editing exercise. As proposals are formed discussion will continue until consensus forms around a small number of proposed solutions, somewhat analogous to how developing Wikipedia articles involves both collaborative editing and discussion.

For those participants that are less deeply involved in an issue, CivicConnect would allow citizens to indicate their support of proposed solutions by simply clicking a *support* button. This would allow ranking of issues and proposed solutions so that the most widely supported solutions are highlighted and positive and negative responses considered. Furthermore, the level of discussion may indicate the level of public interest in certain topics. While these activity and support indicators cannot replace the conventional civic process carried out at city hall, they allow council members "to take the temperature" on certain issues and find novel ideas. Furthermore, we believe that having citizens involved in raising issues and sharing ideas allows them to be more involved in their neighborhood and take ownership of elements of the proposed solutions.

From Awareness to Engagement

Large-scale issues such as fluoride in drinking water and the construction of a tunnel typically engage a large number of citizens in cities like Calgary. However, the smaller scale, but not

less significant issues that pertain to certain streets and neighbourhoods often don't reach a sufficient momentum to sustainably engage the public. With CivicConnect we want to create a tool that will help citizens become aware of what is being discussed and also to build a community of people interested in a particular issue.

As one approach to this, citizens will be able to draw on their existing social networks (and social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter) to invite others to participate in discussion about ongoing issues on CivicConnect. In this way users can develop support for proposals and gather more perspectives to enrich the discussion about an issue. We would also like to provide an *issue feed* for CivicConnect users to be able to track activities around relevant issues. Users will be able to explicitly follow an issue and we will also explore mechanisms for recommending issues as potentially interesting, for example based on neighbourhood, on the interests of a user's social network, past interests, and based on a light-weight tagging scheme for topic categorization.

By providing low-barrier access to a city's civic discourse, our intention is to help citizens develop a gradual awareness about of what is going on in their communities, which we hope will lead to greater engagement. In addition to raising an issue, CivicConnect will also allow people to follow the evolution of an issue from discussions in community groups and at city hall to eventual concrete outcomes in the city.

Workshop Discussion and Summary

We hope that organizations interested in greater awareness of and participation in the decision making process of their cities/communities could use the CivicConnect tool to engage more people in their initiatives and to work with more closely with city officials. During the workshop we would be interested in discussing how the tool can be made more useful for such organizations. In brief, other possible discussion topics include: issues of representation, access, and literacy (are we empowering the empowered?); and how to integrate with existing tools and systems without duplicating existing functionalities and information sources.

In summary, we want to create a tool for citizens to not only learn about ongoing issues discussed by city hall, but also raise issues themselves in an open and transparent manner. This should allow for citizens to come together around issues and develop ideas and potential solutions.

References:
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