

The Pitfalls & Corresponding Best Practices of Online Civic Engagement: A Case Study in Salt Lake City on how Filtering the Feedback can Mitigate Outsider Influence

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Introduction

Governments across the US and Canada are increasingly using online civic engagement tools to involve their communities in government decision-making processes. Those governments know that using online tools can increase public trust in their governance – but only if the tools have the appropriate feature-sets to avoid or mitigate common pitfalls of crowd-sourcing. One of these common pitfalls is called, *outsider influence*. Outsider influence can occur when a government puts its public forums online, because then anyone on the planet – or in the next town over – can try to overly influence the forum. But governments want to focus on feedback from constituents under their jurisdiction.

Best Practice

This outsider influence can be avoided or mitigated by the best practice of using an online civic engagement service that has the following feature-set:

- (1) Requires participants to register in order to post their ideas or comments on the forum,
- (2) Includes street address in the registration process (because zip code typically isn't good enough for determining a participant's jurisdiction),
- (3) Geo-codes each participant's address,
- (4) Maps the jurisdiction,
- (5) Places the feedback on the maps,
- (6) Provides analysis tools to filter the feedback, and
- (7) Doesn't convey the address of individual participants.

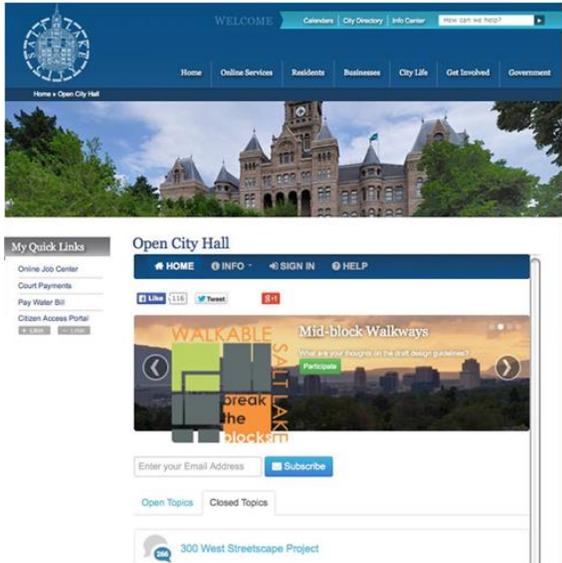
Making these analysis tools available to the public as well as government staff and officials is also a best practice because that transparency can help build consensus in the community.

Additionally, it can be beneficial for the online civic engagement service to be able to configure a topic so that it's available to: (1) the public, (2) just the government's employees, or (3) the email list of a group such as a neighborhood association.

Case Study

Salt Lake City UT has been using online civic engagement since October 2010. As shown in Screenshot 1, the city named its service *Open City Hall*, and departments from across the city government have posted well over 100 topics, and attracted over 33,000 online attendees. The

Screenshot 1: Salt Lake City's Open City Hall online public forum



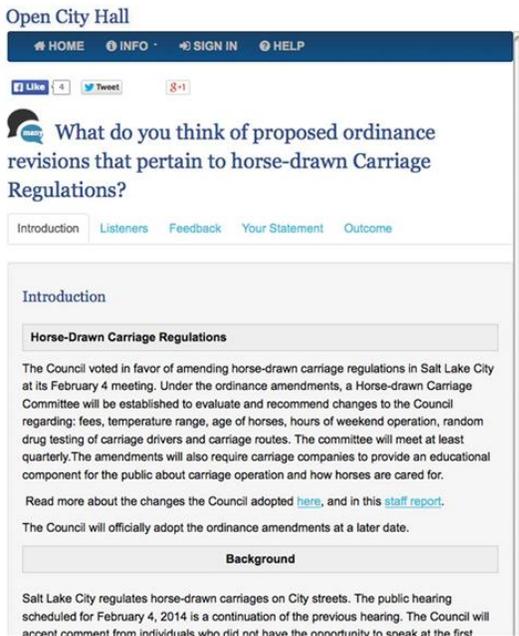
service has a user satisfaction rating of 94% based on over 1,700 survey responses from its users.

In early December 2013, the Salt Lake City government posted a topic that asked the public for feedback on proposed ordinance revisions that pertain to horse-drawn carriage regulations – as shown in Screenshot 2. Staff configured the topic for open-ended comments (not as a poll, survey, priority list, blog, etc). You can visit the topic by going to: PeakDemocracy.com/1616.

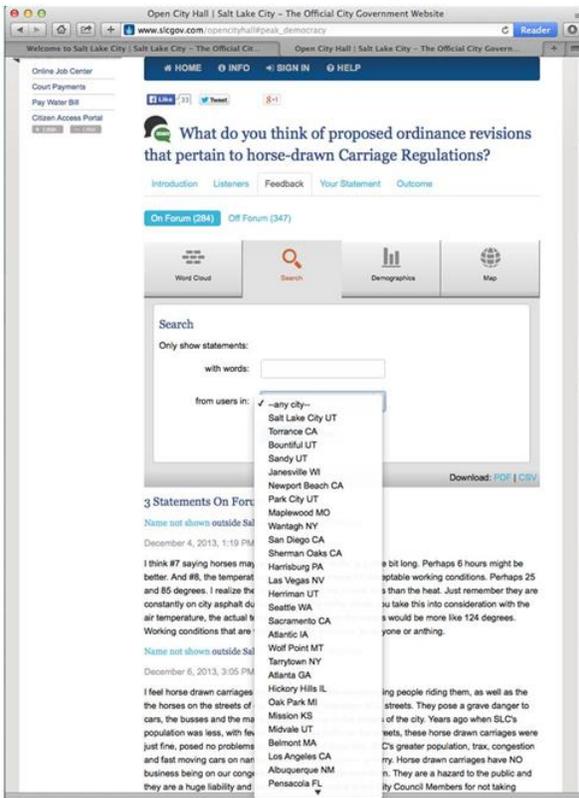
The topic was open for public comment through early February 2014. Over that two-month period, over 1,500 people attended the online forum, and 288 registered participants posted a comment. As shown in Screenshot 3, about 80% of those participants were not residents of the city. Apparently, across the country, people interested in animal rights discovered the topic and posted comments – many requesting a complete ban on horse drawn carriages (not just a modification of the regulations). As shown in Screenshot 4, participants ranged from 170 jurisdictions – including as far away as

Anchorage AK, Key West FL and Montreal QC.

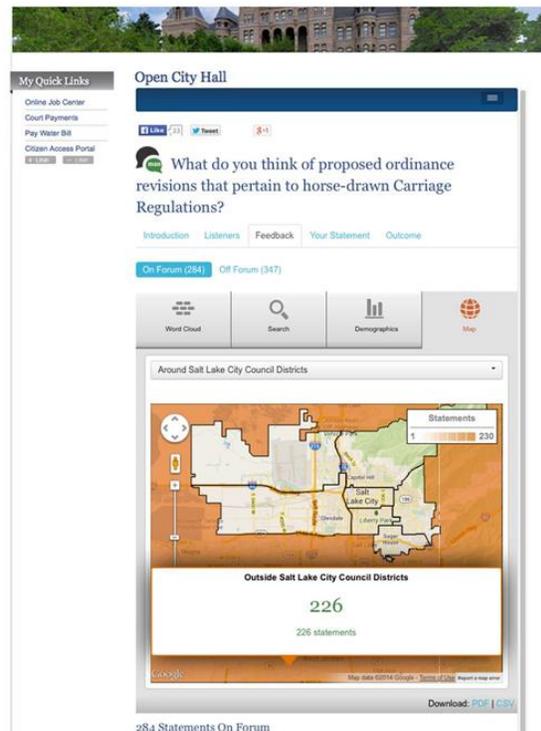
Screenshot 2: Horse-Drawn Carriage Ordinance Revisions



Screenshot 4: Participants are from over 170 other Jurisdictions



Screenshot 3: 226 Participants are not Residents of Salt Lake City



Interestingly, the online service's analysis tools readily revealed that 90% of the registered participants were first-time users of Salt Lake City's online forum. In contrast, 4% of the registered participants had participated in over five other topics on the city's online forum.

While the comments from people living outside of Salt Lake City could be informative, the city's residents, staff and officials were able to use their online platform's analysis and reporting tools to easily filter the feedback and focus on comments from constituents living in Salt Lake City. They were even able to drill-down and analyze feedback by council district, within the downtown area as well as by gender, age group, and also key words.

The city adopted the amendments, and posted that as an outcome on their online forum, and in an email to over 2,100 subscribers to Salt Lake's Open City Hall.

Conclusion:

Online civic engagement can increase public trust in government – but only when implemented in ways that can eliminate or mitigate pitfalls common to crowd-sourcing. One such pitfall is outsider influence that occurs when people outside of a government's jurisdiction try to overly influence feedback to the government. Salt Lake City encountered this pitfall in their recent horse-drawn carriage topic, but was readily able to filter the feedback and focus on constituents living in the city.

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