

The Internet as a Place for Community Action: Results from the Promise Tahoe Website Trial

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Can an Internet-based social networking application link citizens, journalism and community action? For this study, we developed a “Web 2.0” application called Promise Tahoe (“Promise”), designed to create a platform for community problem solving through collective action. The design of Promise aims to dissolve the barriers of traditional journalism and motivate members of the community to get involved. Although the application of Promise Tahoe was not fully tested during the study period, the research we did gather supports the idea that such a tool can be built and deployed within a community to provide positive results.

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The Problems of Citizen Participation

Every night millions of Americans sit down to watch a local newscast. They hear stories of crime, poverty, and conflict. They turn off the television slightly more informed but no more empowered. In many cases, the information viewers get from the news is of no use to them and actually makes them feel powerless to prevent crime, improve the economy or act on any other issues they see highlighted on the news each day.

Such coverage of a community often creates a cynicism about public matters and does not provide a way for people in common geographic regions to join together in action. Communities need a place and a means to encourage news consumers to get involved with public problem solving. Existing forms of mediated communication, such as conventional journalism, can make it more difficult for citizens to overcome the barriers to public life. But the diffusion of the Internet into nearly all American homes offers a wide range of new possibilities for building communities and allowing individuals to interact to solve public problems.

This research focuses on one such possibility: an online social networking and action site for organizing community action called Promise Tahoe. This site, www.ourtahoe.org/promise, is intended to help its readers and viewers take action on the public problems they perceive and journalism they see and read (see Figure 1). We hypothesize that this tool will serve as the catalyst for community action by its readers and viewers. The Promise Tahoe site aims to accomplish this task by providing an online space to facilitate social interaction and cooperation in community activities.

Background to Promise Tahoe

The design for Promise Tahoe is based on a web application found on a UK web site called Pledge Bank (www.pledgebank.com). The premise of the Pledge Bank (see Figure 2) is that people from all over the world can log on and pledge to complete an activity if a specified number of others agree to do the same.

Promise Tahoe works under that same premise as Pledge Bank: “Tell the world “I’ll do it, but only if you’ll help me do it.” However, PT attempts to make a number of significant improvements on the concept. First, PT provides a much more targeted approach. The tool and the research surrounding it focuses on a single community and a single topic: The community and environmental health of Lake Tahoe. It asks members of that geographic community to promise to take action to improve the environment if other members of the community will join them.

At University of Nevada-Reno, a team led by Professor Edward Lenert and graduate fellows Melissa Voigtmann began to imagine what a localized, journalism inspired Pledge Bank might look like. The group researched what motivates people to participate in activities online and what motivates them to participate in community projects in general.

Theory: Motivation and Communication Action

What motives people to participate in public life? Promise incorporates considerations of a citizen's individual motivation to participate in community action.

Many citizens presently perceive that it is often not in their best self-interest to participate because public life is so complex. Indeed, early in the 20th century Walter Lippmann, famed journalist and philosopher, argued that public life was so complex that true democracy is not possible. In his 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, Lippmann refers the numerous public organizations from corporations to neighborhood groups that play a role in public decision-making. In modern life citizens not only have to follow many of these groups to be an active political participant, but they have to prioritize that over the many other obligations that are competing for a piece of their time. In the modern era, there is more media and often further obligations on a person's personal life competing for time and attention. It often appears to be in a person's best interest to deal with private matters before public ones. In private matters people can see the results of their actions. In public matters, as described in the theory of politics at the margins, individuals do not see the results of their participation.

One of America's best-known sociologists, Erving Goffman, developed a theory that we can use to explain how Promise motivates users to participate. Goffman theorized that people play a series of roles, and each person chooses a role based on the current situation in order to make the best impression. He or she is putting on a performance "for the benefit of other people" (Goffman, 1959). Most people want to be perceived as caring, active members of the community. With the Promise Tahoe every community member will have the opportunity to play this role. The online tool gives them a simple way to show the rest of the community they are willing to play that role and the motivation to follow through and present themselves in that manner to the rest of the community.

An online tool also provides advantages for allowing users to create an ideal identity for fulfilling their role. Sherry Turkle, Director of MIT's Institute on Technology and Self, has researched how people create new identities online. Turkle describes this key motivating factor in her book *Life on the Screen* (1995). She says the computer provides a place for people to develop an identity that they might not have the opportunity to develop in the offline world. As she describes how players create new identities in online games Turkle says, "they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction". As users author or join a promise they are telling the community they care about a specific issue enough to act on it. It is a public statement that benefits the person's character.

In our design, in addition to making their own promises, users can promote their new identity by posting stories about their promise activities and email their friends about the promises they have made. Then they can go out into the community and publicly follow through on the promises they made online. If people not only author a promise

once, but also participate in other users' promises, this will show that they have found a place to construct their identity as active, caring members of the community. Continuous participation will also show that users have found Promise Tahoe to be beneficial to their reputations as community members.

Potential Promise users might also be motivated by members of their existing social networks. Individuals with influential reputations can encourage others in their social network to participate simply by association. American sociologist Olsen Mancur, Jr. has studied how the leveraging of social networks can motivate citizens to take collective action. He says people will at times be enticed to participate in action for the public good even when there is no personal, economic gain to be had. People are often motivated by the opportunity to win prestige, respect or friendship (Mancur, 1965). People have a trust and respect for others in their social network. Mancur says that the rewards that come with participating in an activity with your social network are often rewarding enough to take collective action.

Another aspect of motivating citizens to participate is to convince them that their efforts will make a difference. Marcus and MacKuen explain how people survey the world and decide how to or how not to act on it. Enthusiastic citizens are much more likely to take action than depressed citizens (MacKuen & Marcus, 2001). Marcus and MacKuen say "the willingness to undertake a course of action must be based on the continual gauging of the prospects of success, the anticipated effort, and the current stock of physical and psychic resources". The citizens who anticipate favorable prospects for success are said to have a high political efficacy. It is vital to the success of Promise to create a more robust political efficacy, and several features of the tool have been designed with this goal in mind.

By joining together in action rather than taking on tasks alone, citizens can significantly increase their chances for success. We hypothesize that if the Web 2.0 lowers the barriers to participating and public life and highlights a valuable outcome for the users, members of the Tahoe community will use the tool to take action. The success stories featured on Promise Tahoe not only raise people's confidence in the tool, but also give them examples on which to base their own actions.

Harvard sociologist Michael Macy (1991) has done extensive research on collective action problems. In his essay "Chains of Cooperation" Macy points out the common inner dialogue of those considering participation. "If enough people pitch in, we will all be better off, but if no one else is helping, why should I? Then again, if I don't do it, why should anyone else?" Macy's dilemma points to a key element in creating the opportunity for community problem solving. Community members must be properly motivated to participate. If they do not feel personally accountable for the problem, or feel like they have something significant to gain from solving the problem, citizens are much less likely to get involved.¹

¹ Macy (1991) says, "Each actor looks around to see how many others are participating before deciding whether to join in". He gives the example of workers pondering whether to strike. Macy says they will pay close attention to how other workers have already committed themselves before making their

The Promise site may also be able to help journalists bring together smaller publics who are more capable of solving problems together than the large, fragmented audiences of mass media. Unlike the UK Pledge Bank, Promise focuses on one geographic area -- the Lake Tahoe community.²

Another type of barrier to public participation is set forth by Robert Putnam (2000), a scholar known for his work on public participation. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam presents evidence that all participation, from political and civic, to informal socializing, has decreased in Americans. Consequently, Americans have volunteered their time for fewer and fewer community projects. Putnam, in part, attributes this loss in social capital and describes a person's advantage in society based on the relationships they form and their involvement in the community, to modern constraints on time and money.

Putnam records the number of Americans who report, "always feeling rushed" jumped by more than half between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s (2000). Although Putnam debates whether Americans are actually busier now than people were in the generation before, there is no doubt that Americans feel like they are busier. Therefore, citizens must see clear and convincing evidence that a project is worth their time before they will be willing to participate. The Internet's asynchronous design means people with busy lives, parents with children, people who work irregular hours or travel frequently can all find ways to interact with other members of the community and participate from the place and at the time that is most convenient for them.

In sum, citizens often lack the motivation needed to overcome these barriers to participate in community problem solving. The designers of Promise Tahoe considered the aspects of the contemporary life that keeps citizens from taking action and designed the Promise Tahoe and the accompanying journalism to overcome those challenges.

The Design

We based the design of Tahoe Promise upon our research. For environmental action promises, we settled upon an interface that presented the user with the basic form:

own decision. Similarly, members of the Tahoe community will be looking for cues that Promise is a worthwhile investment of time and energy for others before they commit their own time and energy to the project. With this in mind Promise will scatter success stories across the site as well as other places in the community. A new successful group will be featured on the front page of the Promise homepage every week. There is also a successful promises section where people can submit their own stories and photos.

² The Promise application is designed to include a number of tools to help users connect with others in their community. It is intended to help community members solve problems that the government cannot, or will not solve, or is not well suited to solve. It is not intended to help citizens solve all of the problems in their particular community. It is simply a tool to empower users to solve some of their community problems by making it more convenient for members of a community to connect with others in their geographic region.

“I promise to do something if so many others agree to do the same”. Other features included allowing the promise creator to make a homepage for the specific promise. This would allow them to add pictures, text, links and graphics to tell visitors to the site why their promise was important. The group also planned to allow users to add a specific time and location for relevant promises as well as allow for discussion about promises. Other features would help the users promote promises they created or joined. Users could e-mail their friends, write a press release for the administrator to review and possibly send to the media, and add a “Digg” like badge to their personal Web site³.

In terms of information architecture, the Promise Tahoe site is a Web 2.0 inspired application. Web 2.0, refers to a second generation of Web-based communities and hosted services such as social networking sites, wikis and folksonomies that facilitate collaboration and sharing between users (O'Reilly, 2003). Using a Web 2.0 approach, the Promise Tahoe web site is designed to assist in overcoming the barriers that prevent many citizens from participating in public life. Beyond the problematic role of journalism, some of these problems include the fact that public participation is time consuming and often not in a person's own immediate personal interest, public problems are also difficult to solve, and collective action is a challenge to organize.

Research Trial

The research occurred in three primary stages. The first was the design and development of the Promise Web tool. The second was the promotion of the Web tool and the creation of the journalism meant to inspire promises. The third and final stage was the evaluation of the process and the analysis of the results.

Once basic functionality was achieved, the next step was to incorporate the Promise Tahoe into a larger web site called OurTahoe.org. This site is devoted to community journalism and features eight different tools, including Promise, aimed at getting the Lake Tahoe community involved in environmental preservation and policy making. This required us to examine, which features should stay specific to Promise and which features should be consistent with the overall OurTahoe site. We decided that the login required for Promise should be the same login required for the other tools. The archive system, organization, and graphic look all became shared elements with OurTahoe.org. The version of Promise created for OurTahoe.org had a limited number of features. Figure 3 shows the look of the Promise inside the OurTahoe Web site.

The Promotion

³ The Web site Digg popularized the dynamic badge. For Promise, someone would put the badge on their site where they are writing about the promise they joined or created. The badge automatically updates with the number of people who have joined the promise and provides a link directly to that promise's URL. The group also planned a promise map that would organize promises by the place they originated from or the place they were to occur. A traditional search function and a tag cloud that organized the promises by a list of subjects were also included in the original design.

Once Promise was complete, we began appealing to established civic groups in the Lake Tahoe community to build the critical mass of users for Promise Tahoe. Within the first week of the launch of Promise Tahoe, we met with the leaders of six different Tahoe civic groups: The League to Save Lake Tahoe, two different Soroptimist groups located in South Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Green Business Connection, and the North Lake Tahoe Kiwanis Club. We created a hands-on Power Point presentation that took the group leaders through the concept of the Promise Tahoe and then offered a collaborative tutorial on how to register and use the ourtahoe.org account. We explained how the groups could use features like adding links and photos to publicize promise to the public. To provide one extra point of motivation, we told the group leaders that the groups with the best promises would be featured in stories on KRNV News 4, a partner organization in the experiment.

The promotional efforts were exhaustive. From February 9th until March of 2007, we continued to meet with civic groups, and added community leaders, and business owners to the list. We met with leaders of the Boys and Girls Club in South Lake Tahoe, Truckee Trails, business owners that were members of the Sierra Green Business Connection, politicians and environmental groups. These meetings all involved an explanation of the tool, a chance to register for an account on OurTahoe.org, a chance to create a promise, and discussion about how the tool could be beneficial for the individual or the group he or she was representing. We followed up through email and or phone calls at least three times with each group leader.

The Role of Journalism

Promise Tahoe was not created for use in isolation. Promises should be inspired by journalism. A successful Promise Tahoe would not be one that has hundreds of meaningless promises. Instead, a successful Promise Tahoe has thoughtful promises, which create significant opportunities for community improvement and action. Journalism is necessary to inform and inspire valuable promises.

The Promise site is designed in such a way, that journalists can use the tool as a way to see what is valuable to the community for which they are working. Once a community of users begins to build on the Promise Tahoe, pieces of journalism can be inspired by following promises, the people who created them and their challenges and success stories.

After our initial appeal to Tahoe civic groups, we turned our focus to the journalism on OurTahoe.org. We needed poignant journalism on the Web site to test whether journalism used in conjunction with the online tool could provoke action. We began by tackling what she perceived to be the big issues in the communities around Lake Tahoe. We led a team to produce interactive media elements, traditional written stories, and conversation forums on some of the most controversial topics regarding the Lake Tahoe environment. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency was deciding on an amendment to the master plan for development of one of the Tahoe Basin's biggest ski

resorts. Meetings went on for eight or more hours, and more than 100 members of the public turned out to share their opinions. We talked to a handful of Tahoe residence at the meetings. All of them had different opinions on the issue, and all said traditional media outlets had misrepresented them with their coverage.

Melissa Voigtmann and other OurTahoe.org staff members used the Internet and interactive tools to show the full range of the issue along with the trade-offs of different alternatives under consideration. Once users utilized the online tools to sort through the issue, the OurTahoe.org staff created opportunities for community conversation and participation. Elements of the stories included text, flash visualizations of the major elements up for consideration in the various master plan amendments, a game allowing community members to prioritize their values as they concern the ski resort master plan and an opportunity to compare those values to others in the community, unedited statements from the major stakeholders surrounding the issue, and a chance for the user to write his or her own statement and or comment on other areas of the story.

Our sources for the stories were excited about the new approach we were taking in covering the issue. They asked to know more and then pledged to help promote the Web site. We made follow-up phone calls to each contact and sent emails with links to the newly published stories.

The journalism could not be effective if there was no one to see it, and if no one saw the community-based stories, no one would see the community promises, so we continued our tireless efforts to promote OurTahoe.org and the Promise. We turned to the Internet community and posted an advertisement on Craig's List, a free online classified service. The advertisement read, "Are you a person who already does or is willing to take some extra steps to protect Lake Tahoe? A new community journalism Web site called OurTahoe.org would like to feature you. If you're interested in learning more please contact us at www.ourtahoe.org."

Evaluation

After using multiple methods to promote Promise Tahoe, we also employed several methods to evaluate the project's results. The first method was to track the registered users who made and participated in those promises during the study period from February 15 to May 8, 2007. The users register with their name, zip code, and an optional short biography about themselves. Only one of the 14 total promises had enough people to join in order to require the participants to act on the promise they made.

Results

Despite all of the efforts to promote Promise and reach the Tahoe community, we experienced mixed results. From February to May 2007, OurTahoe.org staff attempted to chum the water with 9 unfulfilled promises, while new members, with the help of our hands-on tutorials, created 6. 8 of the 15 promises were for the national or international environmental issues category. Although national environmental issues received the most promises, those promises regarding the Lake Tahoe community (outside of publicizing civic group events) received the most participants. There were four promises in this category. Eight users promised to “enter the OurTahoe.org Earth Day Photo Contest” and to “stay on trails while hiking and biking in the Lake Tahoe area.” Also, these promisers gave extra information about the promise and its goal within the promise homepage. The fact that these users responded to local issues, but not the more prevalent national issues, supports our idea that the internet is an excellent way to create a place that facilitates local community action.

User Analysis

Although the participation is almost too small to accurately analyze, it can provide some information about which marketing techniques brought the most active users to OurTahoe.org and to Promise in particular.

Users can be identified as coming to the site as a result of being part of a community group, an OurTahoe.org story, school, or online group asked to use the Promise Tahoe. Nearly 60 percent of all users who participated in Promise came to Promise as a result of a marketing campaign or a piece of journalism on OurTahoe.org. Of all the users who signed up for OurTahoe.org, 20 percent, responded to promises from the Web site staff.

Survey Responses

We sent surveys to our contacts to find out why they did or did not participate in the activities on OurTahoe.org. Those who did not participate said they “might at a later date,” were too busy, or were confused about how to participate. Five of the survey respondents had made promises. One civic group leader says she participated because a member of the OurTahoe.org staff took the time to walk her through the process of contributing content at the hands-on tutorial. A student at the Incline Village School cited the same reason. Two other respondents said they believed strongly in protecting the environment and educating the public, and that motivated them to participate. We also asked survey respondents to talk about their specific experiences with the Promise Tahoe, if in fact they visited that section of OurTahoe.org. Of the twelve respondents, eight of them say they had visited the page. When asked what they liked most about the Promise page, some of the users commented on specific promises showcased. One person said he liked the, “photo project” in which he participated. One of the promisers said she liked “reading other promises.” Another said, “I like the idea of taking personal responsibility and asking others to do the same, particularly when the promise is out there

for everyone to see and hold the promiser accountable.” Although there were some who found the site forgettable, the people cited here expressed the theoretical reasons for why this set-up refutes sociological studies on community indifference. Pride for our own participation, or reputation-building, knowing that you are not alone, and holding the promiser accountable are all ways Promise supports community action.

Discussion

Although the results of the initial test of Promise Tahoe were inconclusive, our research provides insight into Web 2.0 journalism. By continuing to develop tools in the nature similar to Promise, journalists have an opportunity to engage and involve their viewers and readers with their content. Investigative reporting teams and stories that stir up irrational fears are no longer the way to get viewers to turn on the television news or readers to pick up a newspaper. To make news a priority in their life, viewers and readers need information that will help them improve their lives and the lives of their families and friends.

Comments from the survey respondents as well as verbal feedback from members of the Tahoe community show that community members are looking for a place to facilitate community action. Journalism can fulfill its service to the public by taking on this role. This is not to say that the journalists or media companies are activists for any particular cause, but simply that journalists present opportunities for community members to act and help organize the action those community members choose to take.

Obstacles

The creation and the implementation of the Promise Tahoe was an attempt by a journalist to inspire and organize public action. The concept was well received, but participation was low. 15 promises during the three-month study period does not suggest that Promise is a success.

Possible obstacles in this preliminary experiment include:

- The Web site hosting tool was unknown to the community it was attempting to reach.
- Online communities grow slowly; 3 months does not provide an adequate timeline for growth
- The Promise Tahoe page was not properly promoted on OurTahoe.org

Despite these setbacks, the concept of Promise Tahoe itself remains potentially successful.

Some possible solutions to these problems are:

- On the OurTahoe.org, create stories that inform people how to improve their community, and then refer them to the Promise page to make a promise

- Market Promise Tahoe using online marketing strategies within the local online community
- As technology improves, we can improve our interface to make it more user-friendly

Summary and Conclusions

Essentially, Promise Tahoe is a concept trial that shows that a web site such as Promise can be created and effectively used in conjunction with journalism. The study period did not allow enough time to run an extensive test on whether the tool, in its current form, is effective in provoking a strong response to the journalism with which it is paired.

Thriving Web sites are places that engage people so that they return again and again - not only to visit, but to participate. Beyond simply offering a reliable source of information, these sites provide a way for peers to communicate with one another, a place on the Web to meet and exchange ideas. In constructing Promise, we were particularly interested in the role of geography and locality in building an online community. How do the dynamics of social interaction in a geography-based online community such as Promise differ from those observed in interest and lifestyle-based communities on the Internet?

Researchers are still trying to understand basic issues associated with interaction in online community spaces. Unfortunately, as discussed below, the present implementation of Promise Tahoe has not yet provided enough data to help us systematically address the relationship between offline community, i.e., shared physical space, and online community. We hope to do so in future investigations.

As noted at the outset, this research was an attempt to find whether an online application such as Promise Tahoe use journalism to create community action. Although this preliminary study was too short to come to a solid conclusion, it does support this innovative, potential function of journalism. In ten months we designed and implemented the initial version of the Promise Tahoe, promoted it to the Tahoe community, and produced journalism aimed at inspiring the promises. The types of promises created and the information about the users who created them provide some insight into who our users will be and how they will use the site. With a more aggressive marketing campaign and a longer study period, we feel that this web application holds substantial potential to link the journalism people see and read to the tools and motivations they need in order to meaningfully participate in the improvement of their own communities.

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TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Fig. 1: Screen shot of OurTahoe.org, the host site for the Promise: Tahoe site

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Fig. 2: The PledgeBank site, the inspiration for Promise Tahoe.

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are needed to see this picture.

Fig. 3: The Promise Tahoe Site.

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