AN INVENTORY OF MID-HUDSON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS' WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

How are municipalities in our region utilizing technology to inform and engage residents?

THE BENJAMIN CENTER
SUNY NEW PALTZ
FOR PUBLIC POLICY INITIATIVES

Declining citizen engagement with government is well-documented, and troubling. The utilization of technologies to encourage reconnection provides one remedial response to rebuilding participatory democracy. Websites—and to a growing extent, social media—now represent one of the chief interfaces between governments and their community constituents. By the year 2000, almost every state and a majority of large cities (population 100,000+) in the U.S. had some form of Internet presence, with the great majority (90 percent) including some type of contact information (Stowers 1999). In addition to websites, Facebook and Twitter are among the most commonly utilized venues of social media utilization by governments (Snead 2013).

The use of web-based technologies "increasingly holds the potential to improve transparency, accountability, and public participation, by providing a more effective and efficient disclosure of information to the citizens and organizations and by providing channels for interaction with the government" (Yavuz & Welch 2014). Acting on this view, early in his first term, President Barack Obama proclaimed open government and transparency a top priority. In his 2009 *Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government*, the president stressed that "executive departments and agencies should harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public."

eGovernment is "the delivery of government information and services through the internet 24 hours a day, 7 days per week" (Reddick & Frank, 2007, p. 577), and is defined as "the use of information and technology to support and improve public policies and government operations, engage citizens and provide comprehensive and timely government services" (Scholl 2008). Citizen engagement via "participation, openness, transparency, good governance, and trust" is the goal of eGovernment (Criado et al. 2013). Asgarkhani (2007) argues that there are five good government purposes for the utilization of eGovernment:

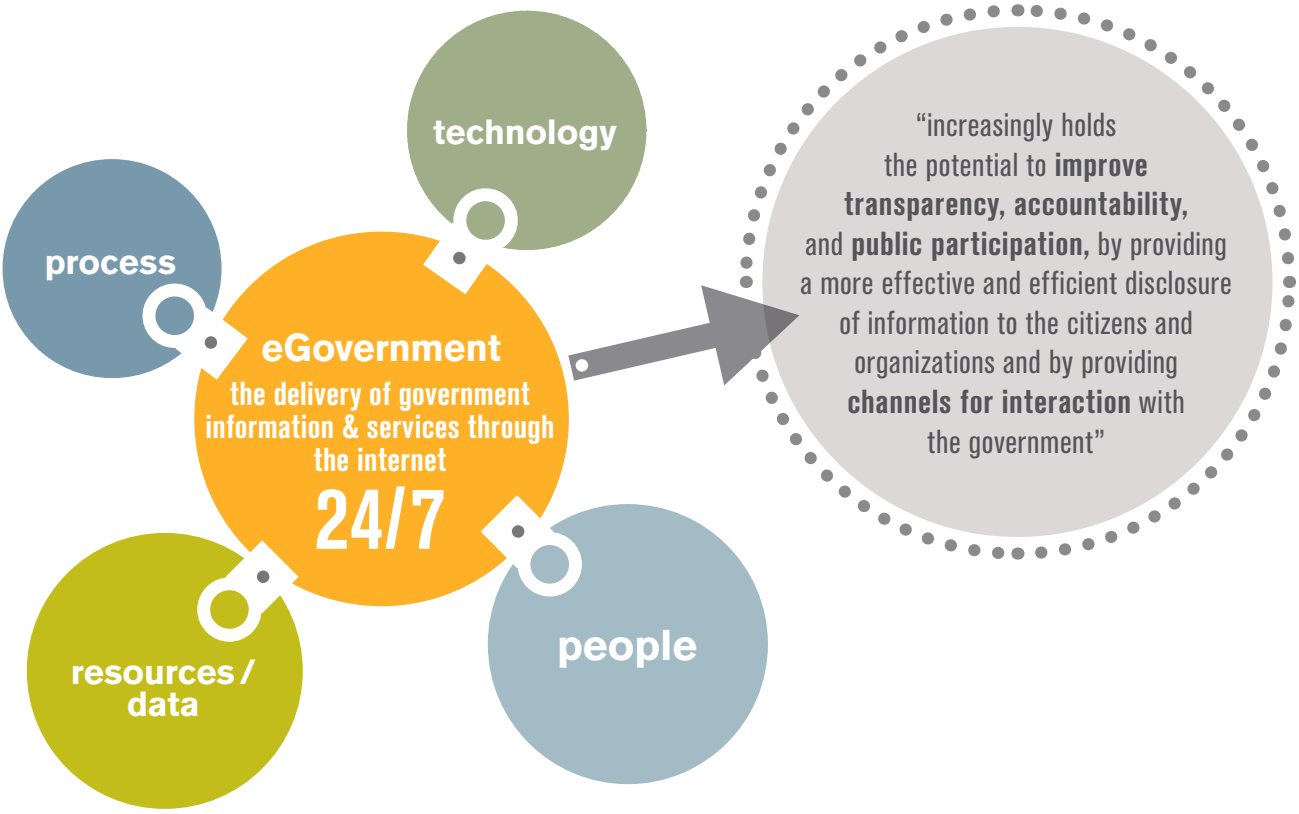
> "providing access to general information, connecting individuals to services (e.g., property information), raising awareness about government decision-making, facilitating communication and consultation with general public, and inviting citizens to participate in public process" (in Armstrong 2010, p. 12).

Research by social scientists and policy analysts who study eGovernment affirms that by providing readily available and easy access to information on websites and social media, the Internet has transformed the way that local governments inform and engage their communities. Furthermore, the greater the availability of information on the web, the higher the level of trust and confidence in government (Criado et al. 2013).

Transparency is "public openness to governmental decision-making" (Armstrong 2010, p. 12). It nurtures good government by informing and involving the public, and helps decision makers adhere to ethical norms and avoid errors. Coglianesi writes:

> "By making more information available, the public can…participate more thoughtfully in the governmental process, sharing new information or raising questions about the adequacy of proposed governmental solutions." Moreover, "transparency can help preventively, making abuses and mistakes by government officials less likely, as those officials know that ordinary citizens, organized interest groups, the media, and other government officials (especially those specifically charged with oversight roles) can more easily monitor the workings of the federal government" (2009, p. 535-6).

In his study of Florida's local government websites, Armstrong (2010) shows that the "accessibility of public information at the local level is a key issue in the overall perception of open government," and "online public records serve as a proxy for the entity's overall level of transparency" (p. 11). In their national study of 500 U.S.



cities, Yavuz & Welch (2014) demonstrate that "higher website openness is positively related to increased frequency of public participation in agency decision-making and civil society influence, increased technical capacity, lower organizational control, and higher perceived usefulness of website technology" (p. 574).

Localities in our region are smaller: they range in population from as small as less than 200 to as large as over 40,000, and average only about 11,500 residents per town or city. There is very little empirical research on eGovernment for smaller places, and this project seeks to fill that gap for our region. For all governments at all levels, size notwithstanding, this report helps show that eGovernment has become the principle means of communication and interaction with citizens in contemporary America.

This report details the findings of a five year tracking study which inventoried how local governments in our Mid-Hudson region are using technology—in particular, websites and social media—to communicate information and engage residents. Our four-county region is defined as Dutchess, Orange, Sullivan, and Ulster counties. Five years ago and again this year, we tracked whether or not local governments in our region had websites, and if so, what types of information were being posted on their sites. Our checklist of forty items included a variety of information in thirteen categories: contact information; recent activities; public access; forms; departments, commissions, committees; financial; law/legal; ethics; official maps and local demographics; planning and development; environmental impacts; emergency management; and, elections. In addition, websites were evaluated on their ease of navigation.

For the first time in 2015, we also looked to see if municipalities had a social media presence. This included local governments with a Facebook page or Twitter account for their municipality as a whole, or for one of their departments.

Our 2010 data was collected from January 5, 2010 through January 19, 2010. The 2015 data was collected February 4, 2015 through March 9, 2015. All 116 jurisdictions—cities (6), towns (74), and villages (36)—in the four-county region were investigated. For each

website located, a standard forty item checklist was utilized to code the presence or absence of particular items found on each website. Over the course of the study, six undergraduate students were trained and contributed to data collection. To provide inter-rater reliability, multiple students inventoried overlapping sites, and any discrepancies triggered a double check visit to sites to ensure accuracy.

The Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz (formerly CRREO) was established in 2007 to further engage the university and its people with communities, governments, not-for-profits and businesses across our region. Our center conducts and publicizes research on regional topics; creates and directs select institutes focusing on specific topics of regional interest; connects and partners with local governments, not-for-profits and businesses to initiate reforms and advocate for best practices; contracts to assess the performance of public and not-for-profit agencies and programs; and works to foster intergovernmental collaboration and community engagement. Through these efforts we seek to inform decision-making in the region, identify opportunities, highlight successes, and bring attention where improvement is needed.

In 2008, with support from U.S. Senator Charles Schumer and funding from the U.S. Department of Education, CRREO launched the Regional Well-Being Project to identify agreed values and goals and to develop ways of measuring our Mid-Hudson Valley communities' social, economic and environmental character that are broadly accepted and allow the tracking of change over time. As part of the Regional Well-Being Project, the 2010 baseline wave of this study was funded and conducted.

In 2015, the second wave of this study was conducted with support from a New York State Assembly Local Initiative Grant sponsored by Assemblymember Kevin A. Cahill (Ulster-Dutchess).

The principal author of this report is KT Tobin, with considerable assistance from student research assistant and Benjamin Center Cetrino Scholar Emily Vanderpool (Economics '16). Janis Benincasa and Gerald Benjamin were contributing editors. The following students conducted data collection for this project: Layla Alqaisi (Political Science '10), Maria Davila (Political Science '10), Sadie Godlis (Political Science '15), Andrea Mazzetti (Sociology '13), and Caitlyn O'Donnell (Political Science '13).

We purposefully have not made this a "report card" for individual municipalities, but rather, a best practices inventory and guidebook. This allows our constituent municipalities to read this report to learn what their peers are doing, and make informed choices about how they can better provide eGovernment.

KEY FINDINGS

97%

of the local governments in our four-county region maintain a website.

This compares to 93% in 2010.

Among those with websites, only

one third

have a posted website policy to inform and guide website visitors.

A plurality **(44% or 51 local governments)** *of websites included at least* **1** *item in* **10 or more** *of our* **13** *categories.*

On average, **city websites** *contained items in* **11** *of the categories,* **town websites** *in* **9**, *and* **villages** *in* **7.**

The **THREE** most common categories of information found on local government websites are **contact information, recent activities,** and documents relating to **planning and development.**

All governments gave some contact information for elected officials over the web.

96% **listed phone numbers**

The number of websites providing email addresses rose from 57% to 85% in the five year period.

Recent activities (96 percent) were often posted including: calendars (75 percent) listing events & meetings, board/council meeting minutes (76 percent), and press releases (63 percent).

- The high percentage for the planning and development category (96 percent) is driven by the increased number of municipalities posting minutes for meetings of both planning boards (PB) (69 percent) and Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) (54 percent), as well as the majority that publish comprehensive master plans (59 percent) on their sites.

- Law/legal (88 percent) was the third ranked category. This is substantially due to the posting of information about the Freedom of Information Act (FOIL), up from 41 to 61 percent of sites in the five year period, and the use of eCode (an online interface that hosts municipal law) by 74 percent of municipalities.

- The two fastest rising categories relate to financial information (73 percent) and ethics (47 percent).

- Growth in the financial category resulted from a much larger number of municipalities now posting their annual budgets online; this percent increased from 28 to 59 between 2010 and 2015.

- The ethics category is comprised of a single item: the publishing of a code of ethics or having it within a local government's eCode. In 2010, a resident could locate a code of ethics on 26 percent of websites; five years later it was up to nearly half (47 percent).

- Some municipalities are required by the state to complete water quality (MS4) reports. This item showed greatest growth in the five year time frame, a 40 percentage point increase from 25 percent to 65 percent of mandated jurisdictions publishing these on their websites.

CATEGORY	2010	2015	2015 RANK	% POINT CHANGE
Contact Information	95%	100%	1	+5
Recent Activities	93%	96%	2	+3
Public Access	11%	20%	11	+9
Forms	76%	87%	4	+11
Departments, Commissions, Committees	70%	73%	6	+3
Financial	56%	73%	6	+17
Law/Legal	83%	88%	3	+5
Ethics	26%	47%	8	+21
Official Maps & Local Demographics[1]		50%	7	
Planning & Development	85%	96%	2	+11
Environmental Impacts	64%	76%	5	+12
Emergency Management		32%	9	
Elections	27%	27%	10	-

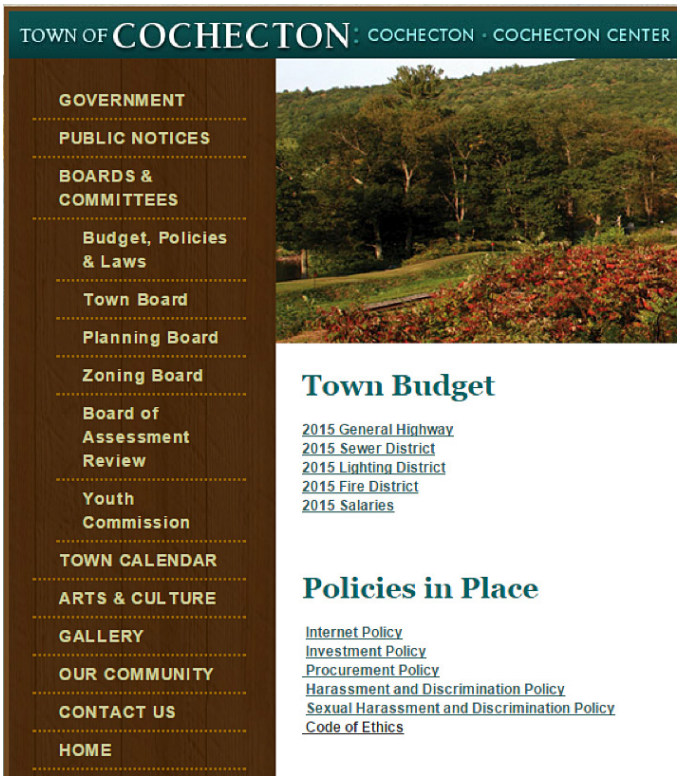
[1] Categories not inventoried in 2010 include local demographics and emergency managements.

In 2015

A resident could locate a code of ethics on 47% of websites

A +21 % point change, up from 2010

Sullivan County's Town of Cochecton has an ethics policy easily located in their "Budget, Policies & Laws" section.



ITEMS (Category) WITH THE GREATEST 5-YEAR INCREASES	2010	2015	% POINT CHANGE
MS4 Reports (Environmental Impacts)	25%	65%	+40
Budgets (Financial)	28%	59%	+31
Email Addresses (Contact Information)	57%	85%	+28
Ethics Policy	26%	47%	+21
Official Maps (Maps & Local Demographics)	26%	47%	+21
FOIL (Law/Legal)	41%	61%	+20
PB Minutes (Planning & Development)	49%	69%	+20
ZBA Minutes (Planning & Development)	36%	54%	+18

MORE & MORE MUNICIPALITIES ARE PUBLISHING INFORMATION ABOUT

water quality, budgeting, ethics, and how to FOIL

74%

utilize eCode

an online interface that hosts municipal law

100%

PROVIDE TELEPHONE OR EMAIL CONTACT FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS

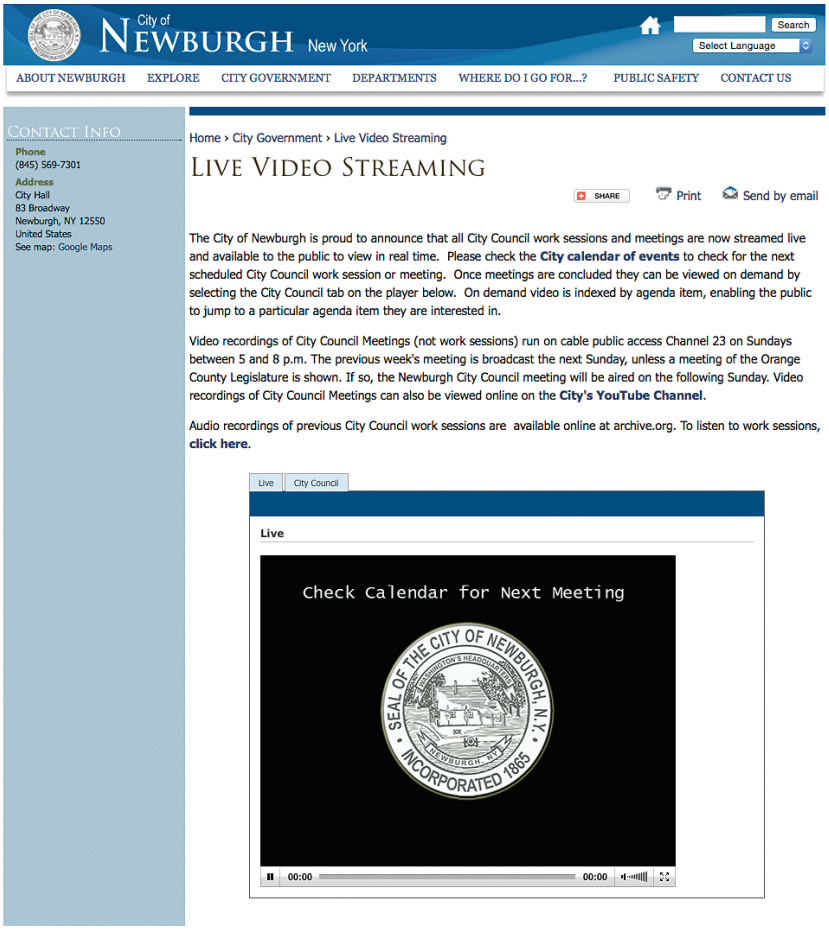
- Only 19 percent of local governments post meeting videos to allow residents who cannot attend in person to view them later online. Only six (5 percent) provide a way to live stream board meetings.
- On a scale of one to five with one representing ability to navigate, and five as great ease of navigation, on average, local municipalities with websites scored 2.8. Cities ranked the highest with a mean of 3.7, followed by towns with a mean of 2.9, and villages with 2.3.
- Approximately two thirds (63 percent) of the local governments in our four-county region has some type of social media presence: a Facebook page or Twitter account for the municipality or at least one of its departments. However, only four percent of those with a social media presence have a published related policy.
- Sixty percent of local governments have a Facebook presence and about one in five (21 percent) have a Twitter account.

Less than

1 in 5

local governments post board meeting videos online.

The City of Newburgh in Orange County real time live streams all City Council work sessions and meetings, as well as hosts video archives of previous meetings. The archived videos are indexed by topic, so web viewers can go right to the discussion of an issue they are concerned about.



96%

present planning & development information

In Dutchess County, the Town of Clinton's Open Space plan is easily found in their main menu and has a page of its own with plan itself as well as maps for quick visual representations.

TOP 10 ITEMS (Category)	2010	2015	2015 RANK
PHONE NUMBERS (Contact Information)	81%	96%	1
EMAIL ADDRESSES (Contact Information)	57%	85%	2
MEETING MINUTES (Recent Activities)	64%	76%	3
MEETING CALENDARS (Recent Activities)	73%	75%	4
eCODE (Law/Legal)	69%	74%	5
PB MINUTES (Planning & Development)	49%	69%	6
MS4 REPORTS (Environmental Impacts)	25%	65%	7
INFO ABOUT DEPARTMENTS (Departments, Committees)	68%	64%	8
PRESS RELEASES (Recent Activities)	60%	63%	9
FOIL (Law/Legal)	41%	61%	10

63%

HAVE A **SOCIAL MEDIA** PRESENCE ON

or

The Town of Warwick in Orange County has a well-organized and regularly updated Facebook page and their homepage contains a Facebook social plugin making it easy for viewers to locate the official Facebook page.

The New Paltz Police Department uses their Twitter account to update residents about road closings and police activity.

SUMMARY TABLE

RANKED ITEM (Category)	2010	2015	RANK
Phone Numbers (Contact Information)	81%	96%	1
Email Addresses (Contact Information)	57%	85%	2
Meeting Minutes (Recent Activities)	64%	76%	3
Meeting Calendars (Recent Activities)	73%	75%	4
eCode (Law/Legal)	69%	74%	5
PB Minutes (Planning and Development)	49%	69%	6
MS4 Reports (Environmental Impacts) (% for MS4s only)	25%	65%	7
Info About Departments (Depts, Committees)	68%	64%	8
Press Releases (Recent Activities)	60%	63%	9
FOIL (Law/Legal)	41%	61%	10
Master Plan (Planning and Development)	52%	59%	11
Meeting Agendas (Recent Activities)	47%	59%	12
Budget (Financial)	28%	59%	13
ZBA Minutes (Planning & Development)	36%	54%	14
PB Agendas (Planning & Development)	44%	53%	15
SEQR Information (Environmental Impacts)	47%	52%	16
Zoning Maps (Planning & Development)	36%	47%	17
Water Quality Reports (Planning & Development)	34%	47%	18
ZBA Agendas (Planning & Development)	37%	46%	19
ZBA Applications (Planning & Development)	28%	44%	20
Info. About Committees and Commissions (Dept, Committees)	60%	40%	21
Schedule of Fees (Financial)	43%	40%	22
PB Applications (Planning & Development)	24%	40%	23
EAS/EAF Form (Environmental Impacts)	25%	35%	24
Public Hearing Notices (Law/Legal)	21%	32%	25
Official Maps (Official Maps & Local Demo.)	26%	27%	26
Local Laws & Resolutions (Law/Legal)	22%	24%	27
Complaint Forms (Forms)	17%	23%	28
Election Info (Elections)	9%	20%	29
Meeting Videos (Public Access)	11%	19%	30
Open Space Plans (Environmental Impacts)	21%	19%	31
EIS Statements (Environmental Impacts)	23%	18%	32
Committee/Commission Vacancies (Dept, Committees)	13%	14%	33
Job Openings (Dept, Committees)	N/A	13%	34
Financial Reports (Financial)	N/A	11%	35
Contracts (Financial)	7%	10%	36
Local Demographics (Official Maps & Local Demo.)	N/A	9%	37
Live Streaming (Public Access)	N/A	5%	38
Election Maps (Elections)	11%	4%	39
Election Results (Elections)	13%	4%	40

For our full report that includes more detail and our works cited list, please visit our website.

www.newpaltz.edu/benjamincenter

Independently and in collaboration with local governments, businesses, and not-for-profits in the Hudson Valley, The Benjamin Center (formerly CRREO):

- **conducts studies on topics of regional and statewide importance;**
- **brings visibility and focus to these matters;**
- **fosters communities working together to better serve our citizenry;**
- **and advances the public interest in our region.**

The Benjamin Center connects our region with the expertise of SUNY New Paltz faculty. We assist in all aspects of applied research, evaluation, and policy analysis. We provide agencies and businesses with the opportunity to obtain competitive grants, achieve efficiencies, and identify implementable areas for success.

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