On the (in)effectiveness of the Share/Tweet button

A study in the context of idea management for civic participation

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Abstract: The authors study the practice of promoting idea campaigns in social networks via the well-known Share/Tweet button. They analyze data about 53 civic participation initiatives collected from IdeaScale, one of the leading online idea management platforms today, and unveil a considerable misconception about the effectiveness of the practice. The article highlights open challenges and suggests a set of alternative techniques to leverage on the ideation capacity of social networks.

Keywords: Idea management, civic participation, share/tweet button, social networks

Introduction

Idea management (IM) is the process of collecting, developing and selecting ideas to develop new, innovative products, services or regulations, or to improve existing ones [1]. We call these processes IM *initiatives*. The practice is not limited to commercial domains only, and, boosted by the World Wide Web, has recently been gaining momentum in the domain of politics and civic participation open to the general public [2]. A prominent example of this practice took place in Finland in 2013 where the public participated in an off-road traffic law reform initiative. The Finns participated online in the lawmaking process by submitting their ideas and by commenting and voting on others' ideas [3]. Similar initiatives are emerging all over the world [4, 5].

The Finnish case emblematically shows how online IM in general has evolved from the naive "Leave a feedback" form of only few years ago into dedicated applications and, more recently, full-fledged IM platforms. Examples of popular IM platforms are IdeaScale (http://ideascale.com), Crowdicity (http://crowdicity.com), MindMixer (http://mindmixer.com) and similar.

In order to increase the visibility of initiatives and to attract participants (*members* of the initiatives), increasingly these platforms leverage on social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter. The effectiveness of this practice is, however, not proven yet. It is the object of this article. We are particularly interested in understanding the effectiveness of the common Share/Tweet button featured by most modern Web sites, including IM platforms, and articulate our research question into the following hypotheses:

H1: Sharing/tweeting about civic participation initiatives in Facebook/Twitter increases the number of people registered as members of the initiatives.

H2-H4: A higher sharing/tweeting activity per member leads to higher productivity of ideas (H2) / votes (H3) / comments (H4) per member.

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We test the hypotheses by analyzing data about 53 publicly accessible civic participation initiatives from IdeaScale and report on our findings, also discussing open issues and alternative ways of accessing social network communities more effectively.

Sidebox: Research on idea management

Research on IM so far has focused on improving the methods used to define suggestions, the mechanisms used to display streams of ideas, the features applied to value proposals, the approaches employed to find contributions, and similar: Deliberation maps [1], for instance, structure participants' contributions as problem trees containing the problem to solve, potential solutions, and arguments for and against proposed solutions. The use of semantic technologies is proposed by Westerski et al. [2] to organize, link and classify the ideas using metadata annotations. Improving scoring methods used to value the ideas is the goal of Xu et al. [3] who present a reference-based scoring model as an alternative to the traditional thumbs up/down voting systems. Faridani et al. [4] introduce a two-dimensional visualization plane to address the *filter bubble* effect — narrowing the exposure to recent, popular, or controversial information — of linear lists used to display opinions in online sites. In [5] the authors address information overload in the evaluation phase with natural language processing methods to identify the core of proposals and to quickly discover reactions inside comments. Along this line, Bothos et al. [6] propose the application of information aggregation markets to facilitate the evaluation of ideas. The inclusion of social networks into ideation processes was explored in [7], where the authors analyze the relationship between the quality of ideas and the connectivity (degree centrality) of the contributors.

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Dataset

Our dataset consists of public-access innovation initiatives on IdeaScale, active as of March 2014. Organizers of IdeaScale initiatives define, as part of the setup process, a list of categories or campaigns inside which the community of participants can post their ideas. An idea is composed of a title and a

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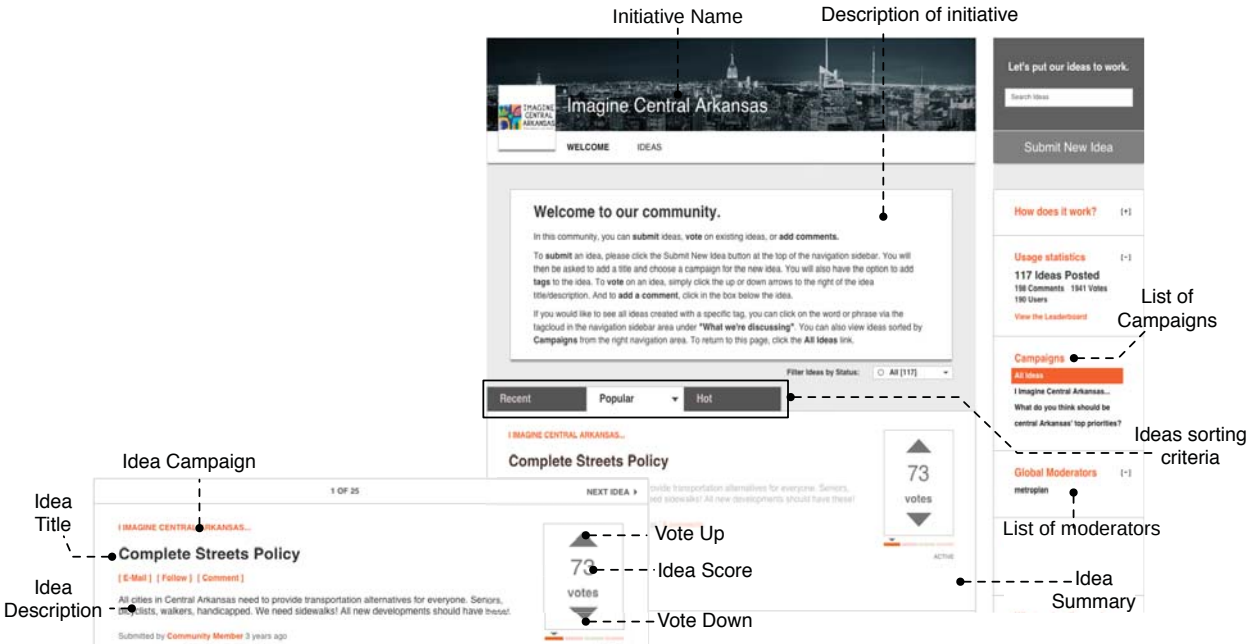
description. Members of the community can comment and assign positive/negative valuations (votes) to others' ideas; also they can share the ideas within their social networks. Figure 1 introduces snapshots of one of the dataset's initiative's home page in IdeaScale (1a) and the voting, commenting, and social network sharing features (1b).



(a) Home page of the initiative in IdeaScale

(b) Idea View

Figure 1. *(a) Snapshot of an initiative's home page; (b) Detailed view of an idea submission and the commenting, social network sharing, and voting functions*

The dataset contains 73 idea management initiatives oriented to civic participation, of which 10 do not enable the Share and Tweet buttons — key elements for our study. Of the remaining 63, we excluded other 10, because of their outlier numbers of members, ideas, votes, comments, shares or tweets.

The vast majority of the initiatives, 42 out of the 53 (79%), engage citizens in discussions on topics of public interest. Almost half of the initiatives are sponsored by public institutions, such as the Helsinki Public Transportation Office, the United States Patent and Trademark Office, or the Redmond City Government. The goal is to harvest ideas from citizens on how public services and infrastructures (e.g., public transportation, downtown parks) or processes (e.g., patent/trademark application process) can be

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improved. The rest of the initiatives are organized by civic organizations (Imagine Central Arkansas, CambiAnzio, Public Works Agency), political associations (Manhattan Young Democrats, Politica Oltre, Cinque Stelle Movement), or supported by ad-hoc communities of citizens that gather together to exchange ideas on how their cities' services (garbage collection, connectivity, libraries, parks) can be improved. The remaining 21% of the initiatives (11) are carried out by political and civic organizations that seek to involve their members in discussions about in-house topics. In the following, we refer to these two clusters as to the *Public* and *In-house* clusters.

Together, all initiatives in our dataset account for 5,288 members and register 2,659 ideas — of which 55 are tagged as implemented or in progress of implementation — 22,332 votes, and 3,855 comments. At the moment we collected the data, the initiatives and their ideas were promoted in total 1,825 times in Facebook and 483 times in Twitter using the Share and Tweet buttons, respectively. Also, 49% (26) of the initiatives showed to be actively running, while 51% (27) did not show activity in the last 6 months before March 2014. The biggest and most significant group of initiatives (the Public cluster) report 4,137 members and record 2,195 ideas — 54 marked as implemented or in process of the implementation — 18,426 votes, 3,519 comments, 1,411 and 411 Facebook and Twitter shares, respectively. (the source code of the crawler, datasets and R scripts of this study are available at http://github.com/joausaga/ims-sn-study).

Enrollment of members

We start our analysis to answer hypothesis H1 by scatterplotting the shares/tweets count versus the members count for the 53 initiatives, see Figure 2(a) and (b). For an effective visualization, we also plot a Loess non-parametric regression curve [6] that fits the data points with a 95% confidence interval. It is immediately evident that the initiatives with higher sharing/tweeting activity are not necessarily those with the larger numbers of members.

A pair-wise correlation analysis shows very low correlation (0.12 for members-shares and 0.05 for members-tweets), which unveils that, in general, increments in the number of shares/tweets only unlikely affect positively the number of members. The situation does not change if we split the analysis by the identified clusters: 0.17 and -0.38 for members-shares and 0.17 and -0.34 for members-tweets in the Public and the In-house cluster, respectively. This, however, provides only a static picture of the data.

In order to obtain also insight into the dynamics of the IM ecosystem and to understand whether shares/tweets help increase participants over time or whether increments are more due to the simple passing of time, we designed a longitudinal analysis for the 26 initiatives of the whole dataset that were effectively active at the time of our observation. Once a week from March to May 2014 (14 weeks), we recorded the number of members, shares and tweets for these initiatives. Figure 2(c) depicts the identified evolution. The number of members grew over the 14 weeks of the study, passing from about 2,233 to more than 2,305 at the end of the study. Shares and tweets reported only slight increments, together with long periods of stability. The number of tweets increased by 2 (from 343 to 345) from week 2 to 4 and remained constant for the rest of the period. The number of shares grew from week 2 to 3 and stayed unaltered until week 11, when it increased again above 1,060 shares at the end of the study (starting from 1,055).

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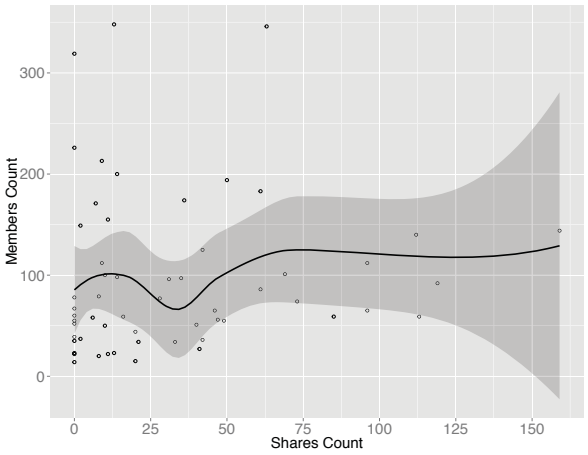
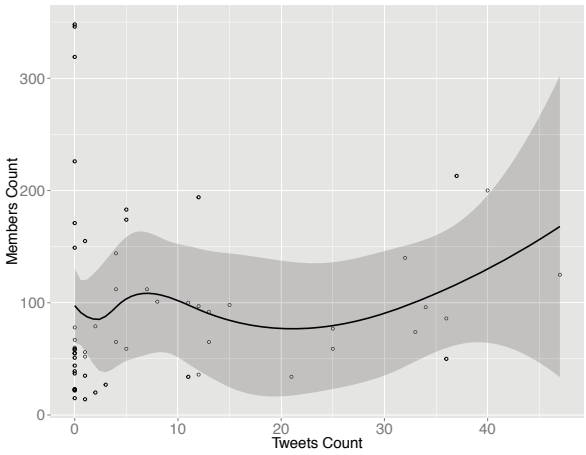
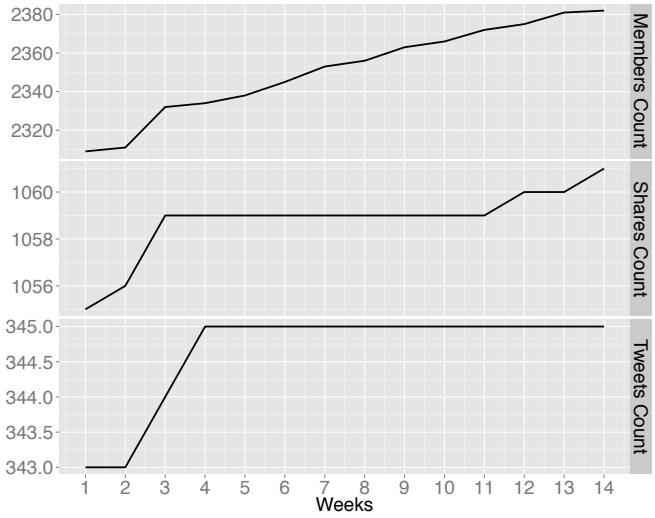


(a) Shares vs. members: a larger number of shares does not lead to a larger number of members.



(b) Tweets vs. members: tweeting does not lead to larger communities of members



(c) Longitudinal study: members grow faster than shares and tweets

Figure 2. *Correlation analysis of the number of shares/tweets and the number of members of 53 IM initiatives, and evolution of shares, tweets and members over 14 weeks for 26 active initiatives.*

At this point, it appears to be clearer that increments in the number of shares/tweets are only marginally related with increments in the number of members. To quantify the real influence of shares/tweets and the initiatives' lifetime, i.e., elapsed time between the start of the longitudinal study and the end of it (in our case 14 weeks), on attracting members, we calculate for the 26 active initiatives the difference in members, shares, and tweets between the beginning and the end of the observation period and conduct multiple regression analyses. Specifically, the relative impact of shares/tweets against lifetime is measured by two different regression analyses, one including shares and lifetime as independent variables and another considering tweets and lifetime as the regression coefficients. In both cases, the variance of members (M) appears to be well explained by the combination of these variables. Shares (S) and lifetime

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(L) account for 98% ($F(2,11)= 289.6$, p-value < 0.05, M=-0.001 + 3.17 (p-value 0.01) S + 0.035 (p-value 9.25 e-8) L) of the variance in members, while tweets (T) and lifetime have an impact of 99% ($F(2,11)= 4269$, p-value < 0.05, M=-0.030 + 6.59 (p-value 0.001) T + 0.036 (p-value 2.26 e-9) L). A comparison of the relative importance of the variables unveils that it is lifetime that explains the largest amount of the variance compared to Facebook shares and tweets (62% and 67%, respectively). A finer-grained regression analysis limited only to the initiatives that showed social activity during the period of observation (all part of the Public cluster) reports a similar trend, i.e., about 65% of the member variation is explained by the initiatives' lifetime.

The evidence collected via both the correlation analysis and the regression analysis does not provide enough arguments to accept hypothesis H1 that sharing/tweeting increases the number of members of idea management initiatives.

Ideation productivity

Next, we study whether the social networking activity of members impacts the amount of ideas, votes and comments produced by the initiatives.

A factor that may affect the production of ideas, votes and comments is, of course, the number of members of the initiatives: intuition tells that the more participants an initiative has, the more ideas, comments and votes we can expect. Suitable correlation analyses on these variables confirm that the number of members is indeed significantly and positively correlated with the number of ideas ($r=0.64$, $p < 0.05$), votes ($r=0.67$, $p < 0.05$) and comments ($r=0.43$, $p < 0.05$).

In order to diminish the bias introduced by the number of members in the study of the impact of sharing/tweeting, we proceed our analysis with the relative numbers of ideas, votes and comments per member (productivity per member). That is, we measure whether the ratios of shares/tweets over members influences the productivity of ideas, votes, and comments of the initiatives and study hypotheses H2-H4.

The scatterplots in Figure 3 reveal that many Facebook shares or tweets per member do not necessarily lead to higher productivity. Interestingly, the most productive initiatives seem to have scarce tweeting activity per member, while for the Facebook shares per member each plot has its own dynamic. Figure 3(a) shows that most initiatives have only small values of shares/tweets per member, highlighting that the productivity of ideas is almost not related with the sharing/tweeting. As for the votes, Figure 3(b-left) shows a slight increase in the productivity for share ratios between 0.5 and 1.5. It appears that the number of shares per members affects the productivity of votes when at least one share is generated every two members. As for the comments, the left plot of Figure 3(c) seems to indicate that the ratio of shares over members positively contributes to the productivity of comments as soon as the members produce at least one share in average.

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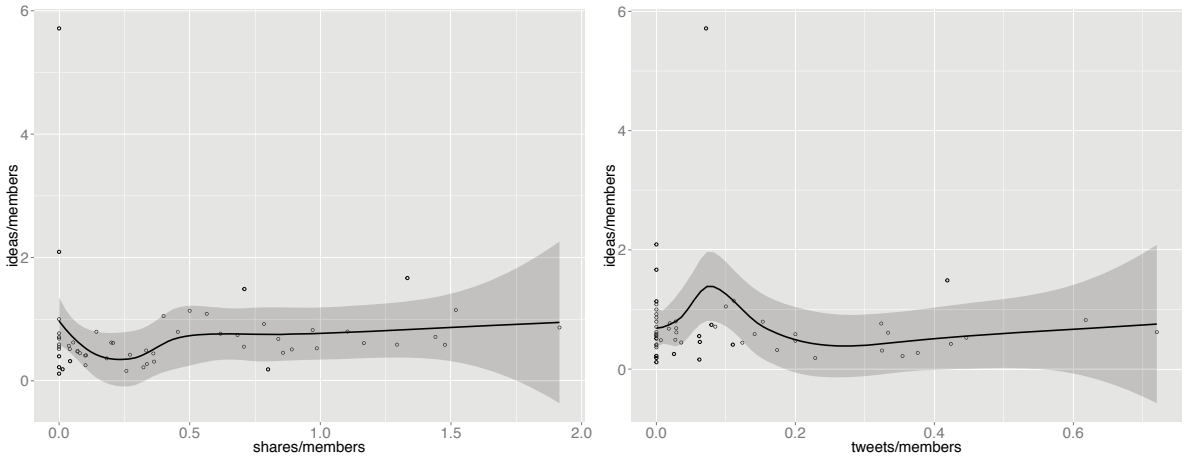
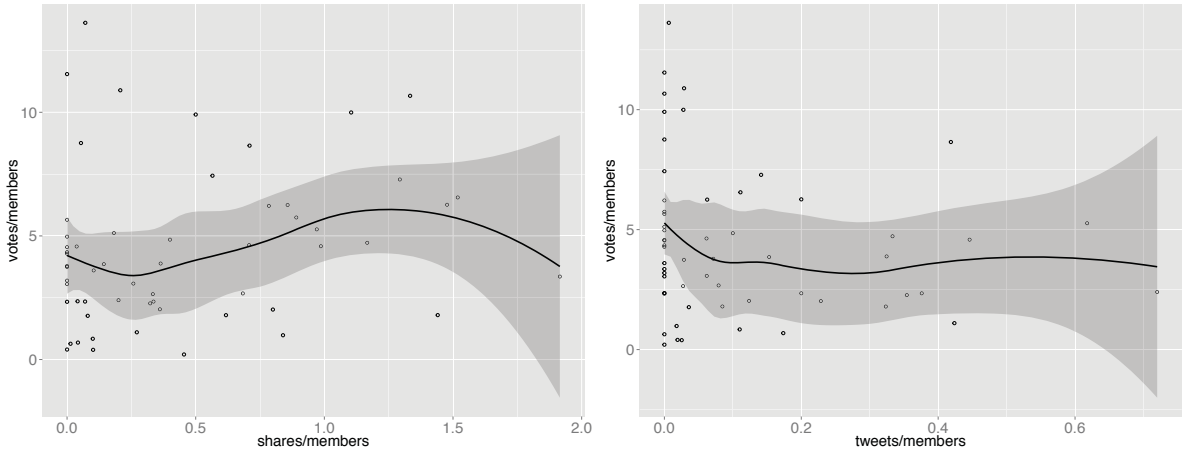
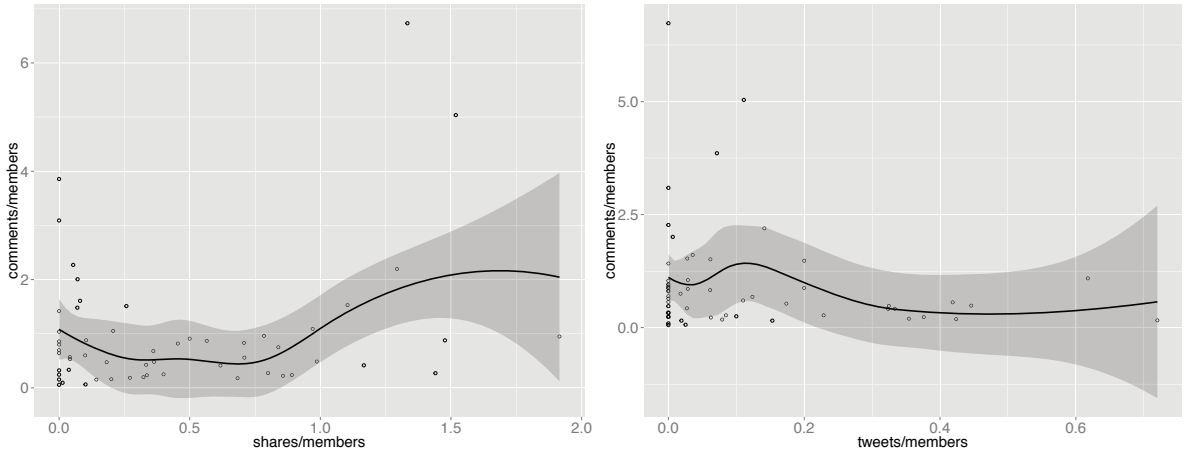


(a) Shares/tweets per member vs. ideas per member



(b) Shares/tweets per member vs. votes per member



(c) Shares/tweets per member vs. comments per member

Figure 3. *Correlation of the productivity of members (ideas, votes and comments per member) and the average member's social networking activity (shares/tweets per member).*

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We also analyze the correlation on these variables. The number of shares per member is only slightly correlated with the number of ideas (r=0.03, p-value=0.84), votes (r=0.20, p-value=0.15), and comments per member (r=0.24, p-value=0.08). Also the number of tweets per member has a low dependence on the number of ideas (r=-0.05, p-value=0.74), votes (r=-0.13, p-value=0.35), and comments (r=-0.18, p-value=0.21) per member. These numbers confirm analytically what was anticipated intuitively by the plots in Figure 3: the productivity of ideas, votes and comments seems to be independent of the sharing and tweeting activity of the initiatives' members.

Similar low correlations also hold for the Public and In-house clusters individually. An interesting exception can be identified for the In-house cluster, where sharing on Facebook has a positive influence on the number of ideas per member (r=0.68, p-value=0.02). This correlation is likely explained by the tighter relationship that binds the members of an organization: they know each other, and many of them are also friends on Facebook. This is fundamentally different from the general audience targeted by the Public cluster.

In summary, we thus *accept hypothesis H2 for the In-house cluster limited to Facebook shares and idea productivity*, while we *reject hypotheses H2-H4 for the Public cluster in general and the other combinations studied for the In-house cluster.*

Ideation inside social networks

Given the above results, next we try to understand in more detail what happens when information about IM initiatives is promoted inside social networks using the Tweet button and whether social networks are suitable at all for IM. We limit our analysis to Twitter, as that the majority of its content is publicly accessible (99% according to Mashable's social media expert Kurt Wagner: http://mashable.com/2013/08/13/topsy-opens-twitter-data). This is different from Facebook, which posts are strongly regulated by privacy policies and generally not publicly accessible.

Usually, the Tweet button is equipped with a default message that pre-fills the Compose box of tweets. Since the goal of tweeting is to drive traffic to an initiative's website, this default message typically contains the URL of the website, among other properties. We can use this URL as identifier: using the REST API of Twitter and the service Topsy (http://topsy.com), we searched for the URLs of the initiatives' websites as well as for the URLs of their ideas (in IdeaScale every idea is accessible through a dedicated URL). We collected in total 723 tweets of which 265 are about initiatives and ideas posted via the Tweet button, whereas the remaining 458 tweets were posted using other means, such as Twitter's Web client, smartphone app or other external clients, such as Buffer, TweetAdder or Hootsuite. The vast majority of tweets (81%) was published by the members; if we match the tweets' handlers with the username of moderators and administrators or with the name of the initiatives, it can be seen that the remaining 19% of the tweets were authored by the organizers of the initiatives.

A manual inspection of a sample of the collected tweets unveiled that members use Twitter for generating awareness (in line with its use in general), as the following example shows: *"We want to hear your ideas! #transformrockford"* (@TransformRkfd) and *"Do you have an idea for Huntsville? Join the discussion at Imagine Huntsville http://www.imaginehuntsville.com"* (@HSVevents). However, here Twitter serves for two specific purposes: (i) to promote ideas and fuel the discussion; and (ii) to cast votes for ideas. An instance of these purposes can be found in the following tweet that promotes an idea and requests voting

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actions from followers: *"This is awesome, guys. Pls RT & Vote for the game Myopia in the @WhiteHouse Initiative Games For Impact http://gamesforimpact.ideascale.com/a/dtd/MYOPIA-An-intergenerational- collective-action-game-series*" (@jesserker). Through this analysis, it was discovered that moderators' tweets target similar goals: create awareness, promote interesting ideas, cast votes for ideas, and, in addition, publicly thank members for their contributions.

The effectiveness of the Tweet button can be gauged by comparing the reactions its tweets raised against the reactions triggered by the tweets coming from others sources (reactions are measured by summing up the number of retweets, replies and favorites). The data we collected show that tweets generated with the Tweet button produced in average about three times fewer reactions: tweets posted using the Tweet button triggered in average 0.39 reactions, while tweets published through other means raised in average 1.30 reactions. Moreover, with a 95% of confidence ($p < 0.05$) we can say that the average number of reactions triggered via Twitter's Web client and other clients is higher by two to three times (0.70 to 1.12). The maximum number of reactions triggered by tweets posted through the Tweet button is seven, whereas tweets published using other Twitter clients received from three to even about 30 reactions. Repeating the same analysis for moderators/administrators and members individually, does not reveal any difference among the two types of participants.

Our intuition is that the difficulty to catch attention with the Tweet button may be the fruit of its generic and impersonal nature (default text only). In contrast, tweets posted through other means are usually written manually and contain personal comments, emotions, excitement or similar - all characteristics automatically generated tweets do not have.

For instance, in Figure 4 we present a couple of interesting tweets worth noting. Figure 4(a) introduces a sample of messages exchanged between the followers of @scarpon (moderator of the initiative City of Redmond) about improving the public services of Redmond, Washington (USA). The long discussion produced 36 tweets from 20 different participants and generated valuable content, which very likely was however not transported back to IdeaScale and, hence, lost. Figure 4(b), in fact, captures a case where a Twitter user contributed to the initiative called "VTA," triggering the answer *"Thanks for the suggestion! Pls submit at http://vta.ideascale.com so others can vote on it"* (@VTA). The suggestion was considered just as valuable as suggestions generated within the "official" platform. However, unless the moderator moves the content of the tweet to IdeaScale or the person who posted it takes the time to do so, the contribution, runs the risk of getting lost. Losing this kind of feedback could be a huge loss. It suffices to recall that the Icelandic citizens employed Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr to reform their national constitution [4].

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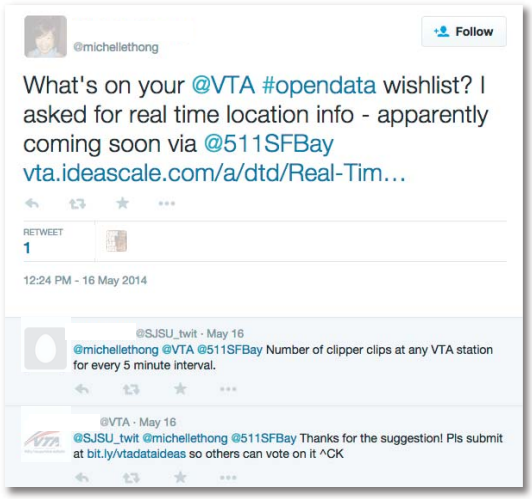
(a) Discussion about initiative "City of Redmond"



(b) Suggestion posted by @SJSU_Twitt within the context of the initiative "VTA"

Figure 4. *Two examples of manually written tweets with an excerpt of the value-adding reactions they triggered.*

Discussion and challenges

The findings we report on in this article somewhat surprisingly reveal that the Share/Tweet buttons are, in general, not effective in helping IM platforms to increase participation or productivity. However, they may work in situations where the members are already connected through online social relationships, such as the case of the initiatives in the In-house cluster. It is evident that social networks have a huge potential as incubators of ideas and proposals, yet, current techniques fail to leverage on it properly. In fact, even if triggered by Facebook shares or tweets, people inside social networks apparently are not willing to go to and register for another platform, not allowing IM initiatives to track and value their ideas and feedback.

We are aware that these findings are specific to the context of idea management for civic participation and limited by the observational nature of the study (e.g., we could not test reactions to artificial stimuli). Also, the study may suffer from "lurking" variables, such as unattractive discussion topics, non-committed organizers or moderators, unclear participation rules, timing of our observation (we could not

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study the startup phase of new initiatives). However, the study provides an analytical picture of a domain that has strong commonalities with other contexts that aim to attract people from social networks to their own platform, application or initiative (e.g., advertisement or entertainment).

The challenge seems to be how to harvest the ideas and feedback people leave inside social networks. This is an engineering problem that, first and foremost, requires understanding and leveraging existing social network usage conventions. In the specific context of IM, we identify three levels of intrusiveness of possible engineering approaches:

- *Use of existing conventions*: this approach aims to identify ideation initiatives inside social networks, e.g., conversations among people, and to harvest ideas and feedback without however touching the social networks themselves. An example is sentiment analysis [7].
- *Introduction of new conventions*: this approach aims to establish ideation-specific conventions, e.g., dedicated hashtags and conversation rules, to trigger ideation initiatives and to facilitate harvesting results. An example is the initiative MyIdea4CA, which was launched by the former governor Schwarzenegger to encourage citizens of California to post ideas for the state on Twitter with the hashtag *#myidea4ca* [8].
- *Change of conventions*: this approach aims to introduce new features and conventions into social networks, e.g., via functional extensions thereof. An example is supporting the crowdsourcing of tasks inside social networks, as for example proposed by Bozzon et al. [9].

Which of these approaches or combination thereof performs best still needs to be studied. As hinted at by the findings of our study, their departure from the naive Share/Tweet buttons is however a promising step forward that goes far beyond the domain of IM for civic participation.

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