

Real Talk: **A Toolkit for Community Engagement, Transparency, and Mobile Governance**

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Abstract

The *Real Talk* toolkit is a design concept for community engagement, transparency, and mobile governance. It is inspired by the design imperative to close the gap between the way communities are experienced online and in the real world. The toolkit design, which includes vibrantly colored, bio-degradable stickers that can be applied to a physical environment, allows a community that is mobilized around an issue to make its concerns, local knowledge, or community pride visible both in the real world and online. Making this information visible enhances opportunities for engagement with local government and community stakeholders.

Keywords: e-governance, transparency, mobile phones, ICTs, community informatics

Introduction

Declining urban tax bases and the ubiquity of cell phones and other forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the United States have contributed to increasing calls for the development of mobile and e-government platforms (see, for example, <http://codeforamerica.org>). A major motivation for such calls is the hope that web-based platforms will lead to increased information sharing and transparency between governments and their constituents. Governments see the potential to collect data about, communicate with, and deliver information to citizens. NGOs and other community organizations see the potential to use such platforms to increase the visibility of their needs, play a larger role in decision-making, and more easily access information that the government collects.

To achieve these goals, mobile-phone-accessible, e-governance platforms hold particular promise. Cell phone use has become a ubiquitous mode of communication in the United States. By 2010, 96% of the U.S. adult population owned a cell phone (U.S. Wireless Quick Facts, 2011). Among young adults in underserved populations, uptake of cell phones is even greater than the general population. Non-white users, particularly Latinos and African Americans, access many more cell phone data functions than their White counterparts (Smith, 2010). Nonetheless, a gap remains in terms of continuous access to the Internet and more interactive, user-generated, Web 2.0 functions that may not be accessible via non-smart cellular phones. As increasing engagement in governance by all citizens becomes a greater national priority, it becomes a *design* priority to:

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- consider technologies that afford access to a range of citizens
- recognize varying levels of access to ICTs, and
- encourage participation in governance from the community up rather than the top down.

Taking these priorities into account ensures that we do not simply bridge divides with technology, but that we build “two-way bridges” of communication and empowerment for communities and local governance (Eglash, 2002). These design priorities were the motivation behind the conceptual design of *Real Talk*, a multimedia community toolkit for local mobile governance.

In this manuscript, we first describe the methods and design context for the conceptual design of *Real Talk*, and then detail the key components of the platform. We focus the discussion of this paper on the theoretical and practical implications of the design choices we made, and highlight the potential that *Real Talk* has for empowering and engaging a broad citizenry through both digital technologies (i.e. mobile phones) and analog technologies (i.e. stickers).

Methods

In August 2012, this paper’s authors formed an interdisciplinary design team of doctoral students from information science, philosophy, public health, and design departments at five different universities as part of the Values in Design (VID) 2012 doctoral workshop (<http://vid.ics.uci.edu/2012/02/29/278/>). This workshop was an intensive week dedicated to the theory, methods, and design of values in, of, and from information systems and technology.

As part of the “design” component of the workshop, student teams were formed and tasked with a design challenge that explicated both a value and an information technology. Our team used a series of design techniques including defamiliarization (Bell, Blythe, & Sengers, 2005), personas (Kuniavsky, 2003), low-fidelity paper prototyping (Sefelin, Tscheligi, & Giller, 2003), and conceptual investigations (Friedman & Freier, 2005) to engage with the value of transparency and the affordances of mobile devices in response to the design challenge outlined below:

...Transparency in government is linked to better engagement, feelings of empowerment, and participation in local government by the community... Low-income teenagers are more likely to access the Internet through a Smartphone than through a computer... However, these same groups may be among the most underserved in terms of local government access and participation, particularly in the area of laws and services created to protect their rights. Your challenge is to design a mobile application or device to increase transparency of or access to government services to underserved individuals or communities. (Values in Design email, 07/03/2012)

Following Turilli and Floridi (Turilli & Floridi, 2009), our team approached transparency as an instrumental value that enables other values (such as welfare, safety, or accountability) through the making visible of relevant information.

Preliminary Design

The design concept includes a multimedia toolkit that would be funded through public-private partnerships. It is designed to meet communities or neighborhoods where they are in terms of ICT access and use as well as engagement with local governance. The *Real Talk* concept leverages the current popularity of ICTs and introduces an older form of expression—stickers, although in this case, biodegradable ones—to afford community identification of, conversations about, and resolution of local issues. The stickers also make these issues visible in both the urban landscape and, with the help of ICTs, in cyberspace.

Real Talk reduces barriers to participation by offering incentives. The program provides cell phone minutes or gift cards in order to recruit and retain a core group of community ambassadors (e.g. young adults at a community center). The toolkit provides the community ambassadors with both digital and tangible templates of timelines, budgets, sticker and branding designs, as well as an easy-to-use manual concerning community building, prototyping, and social media tools. Using the toolkit, the

ambassadors deploy five modules: 1) brand development, 2) relationship building and community organizing, 3) a 24-hour “stickout” campaign (see below, *Figure 1*), 4) documentation of the campaign onto the online community dashboard, and 5) next steps dialogues.



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For example, imagine that 10 youth ambassadors in Detroit have designed plain, circular (4” diameter), bright pink stickers (see *Figure 1*). Using the toolkit for guidance, they decided on this simple brand for three reasons. First, the hot pink color is one that attracts attention. It is uncommon in urban landscapes, and their research revealed that it elicits feelings—calmness and relaxation—that may be conducive to peaceful dialogue. The shape, size, and blank space were found to be aesthetically pleasing with enough room to write messages on if desired. Finally, the simplicity of the design was cost- and time-effective.

During the community-organizing phase of the project, youth discussed the imminent stickout campaign with residents, business owners, organizational leaders, government officials, and law enforcement. These discussions established buy-in among stakeholders who agreed that the campaign may help resolve current concerns around community life. *Figure 1* reveals that community members felt that the liquor store’s corner was a source of concern; for example, drug dealing may have been clustering there throughout the day, making its use difficult for passersby and for youth and adults who wait for the bus there. The stickout campaign’s physical and cyber presence (photos and the sticker messages were uploaded to the community dashboard) marked the beginning of the community’s attempt to reclaim urban space, begin dialoguing, and plan for change.

Conclusion

Although other sticker campaigns have been launched to highlight social issues (Chang, 2010; “Project Sticker Shock,” 2003; “THIS IS PUBLIC HEALTH,” 2012), they have not involved multi-modal (e.g. via online, via cell phone, and in community spaces) and multi-directional dialogues (e.g. with each other and with various stakeholders within and beyond the community or neighborhood). They have also not engaged mechanisms like a community ambassadorship and a community dashboard for tracking, locating, compiling, and visualizing the information that the stickers generate. In addition to generating buy-in, the community-organizing phase entails that ambassadors working with community members and stakeholders discuss the possibilities of both positive and negative uses of the stickers during the 24-hour

campaign day and ways to create productive conversations and actions around unexpected outcomes. Following the campaign, stakeholders and citizens assess the information made visible by the stickers and their documentation and determine next steps.

The sticker offers many appealing affordances to facilitate civic participation. Enhancing creative and visual expression, the sticker is considered a more tribal form of communication that began appearing in the 1920s (Vigso, 2010). In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it has increasingly carried political, and often anti-establishment, messages (Vigso, 2010). The sticker also provides a degree of anonymity and privacy that a purely ICT-driven platform would not, as the only community members gathering and uploading content for the electronic community dashboard would be the community ambassadors. Further, biodegradable stickers are impermanent. While one issue might be relevant for a particular deployment of the *Real Talk* program, in our design concept, the stickers fade and disappear from the landscape over time, allowing community conversations to evolve as well.

Real Talk is an innovative and alternative community-building model that attempts to bridge the divisions that we often impose upon the public and private spheres as well as online and offline spaces (Gray, 2009). It drives bottom-up social investment, technological capacity building, and community engagement that may lead to participatory indicators of neighborhood-level health, economic, environmental, and infrastructural inequities. Finally, it creates a range of opportunities for low-cost participation in governance and potential payoffs in terms of social equity and engagement.

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