

Social Media for Community Organizing: The Fight to Save Oconomowoc Dispatch

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Abstract

Using theories about community organizing and civic engagement, this study examines a small Wisconsin community's efforts to save its local 911 dispatch center from being dismantled. It is a qualitative project that draws on autoethnography and interpretive content analysis to show that community organizing across multiple spheres of engagement (e.g., online and face-to-face) helps people recognize their ability to impact local politics and enact tangible change in their community. Our case study of the Save Oconomowoc Dispatch campaign suggests that social media tools are an important element of community organizing and that online citizen-led campaigns can help residents feel empowered and better prepared to act in offline settings. Most importantly, we show that a push campaign focused on disseminating information, such as the use of Facebook posts that do not feature comments, can be sufficient in helping residents recognize the importance of local services and take real-world action. This finding suggests that extensive online deliberations may not always be necessary for effective community organizing and that community leaders' strategic use of one-way interactions on social media are effective ways of engaging residents in local politics and government.

In the early fall of 2019, the city of Oconomowoc, Wisconsin—a community of about 17,000 residents located 35 miles outside of Milwaukee—found itself at the center of a local 911 dispatch crisis. The city's governing body, the Common Council, announced its intent to remove the current dispatch center from the city's budget, a move that would leave the community without local support and fully reliant on the larger, county-wide dispatch center, Waukesha County Communications (WCC). The Common Council's decision to close the dispatch center was sudden and caused strong pushback in the small Wisconsin community of mostly white, middle-class residents. Soon after the announcement, residents, including the first author of this manuscript, Rachel, began to organize to save the local dispatch center. The organizers titled the campaign "Save Oconomowoc Dispatch," which was then stylized into the hashtag #SaveOconomowoc across social media posts and campaign items. This community-driven campaign started online in the form of a Facebook group, but then grew to include offline components such as yard signs and culminated with an in-person gathering at the Common Council meeting where, thanks to residents' organizing efforts, the city voted seven to one in favor of keeping the local dispatch center. Although considered a local triumph, the community's success was only short-lived. In 2021, Common Council members brought the dispatch issue up again and this time residents were unable to save their local dispatch center.

By following the 2019 Save Oconomowoc Dispatch campaign, we show that when local residents take sustained collective action toward change, they can make a difference in their local community. We find that social media tools are an important element of community organizing and that online citizen-led campaigns can help residents feel empowered and better prepared to act in offline settings. Most importantly, we show that a push campaign (Gordon & Trammel, 2016; Zavattaro et al., 2015) focused on sending information out through one-way communication—such as the use of Facebook posts that do not feature comments—can be sufficient in helping residents recognize the importance of local services (e.g., dispatch) and take real-world action to address change in their community. This suggests that extensive online deliberations may not always be necessary for effective community organizing and that community leaders' strategic use of social media to share informational materials are effective ways of engaging residents in local politics and government.

Before delving into the particulars of this campaign, we provide contextual information about community organizing, civic engagement, and the importance of local politics. Civic engagement encompasses a range of participatory actions and behaviors used to address issues of public concern (Seelig et al., 2019). Typically, the goal of civic engagement is to improve conditions in one's community and contribute to a better

future for all (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Seelig et al., 2019). Civic engagement goes hand in hand with community organizing in that both focus on creating change and making a difference at the local level. However, community organizing, more so than civic engagement, places a strong emphasis on the cooperative efforts and banding together of local residents (Christens et al., 2021). In other words, community organizing is about local coordination. It is a community-driven process that allows residents to increase their social power and act collectively to address local problems both online and offline (Christens et al., 2021).

Because community organizing is such a powerful tool for change, there have been calls to increase civic instruction in schools and expose youth to opportunities for political participation in their local communities (Padilla et al., 2020). Yet involving residents of any age in local politics and government can be difficult for several reasons, including the public's lack of awareness about public affairs and government topics that are often too complex or difficult to understand, such as limited budgets, group conflict, and unique organizational structures (Levenshus, 2016; Sundeen et al., 2007). This is unfortunate since local government is where people's voices have the most weight and where change is most likely to have meaningful, immediate impacts. Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) note that "the local level is the most permeable region of government," and that local decisions on matters such as crime prevention, school governance, and budgets directly affect resident's quality of life and should therefore warrant their interest and participation (p. 64). Our study intervenes in this area. Through a detailed case study, we suggest that community organizing across multiple spheres of engagement—both online and face to face—helps people recognize their ability to impact local politics and enact tangible change at the community level.

Although there has been extensive research on residents' involvement in local politics as it relates to law enforcement, community policing, and other citizen partnerships with police, both inside and outside of the U.S. (Bullock & Leoney, 2013; Ramirez, 2018), little is known about how communities relate to emergency dispatch services and whether they value the crucial role dispatchers play in coordinating local emergency operations (Gasaway, 2013). This is an unfortunate oversight as dispatch workers occupy a vital function as one of the first points of contact during an emergency. They carry the responsibility of calming callers and

extracting relevant information about the situation before dispatching the appropriate provider to local residents in need (Gasaway, 2013). Our examination of the Save Oconomowoc Dispatch campaign shows that community members concentrated much of their efforts on teaching the public about how the dispatch center operates, and that residents quickly began to recognize it as a nexus of safety and responsibility worth saving.

Literature Review

Citizen Involvement in Local Government

Active citizen involvement in local politics is central to a well-functioning democracy (Lachapelle & Shanahan, 2010; Padilla et al., 2020). When citizens mobilize and band together, they can become key players in policymaking and agents of change in their local communities (Einstein et al., 2019). Although public administration theorists recommend that citizens be involved in decision-making strategies, "achieving effective and active participation is often a challenge" (Lachapelle & Shanahan, 2010, p. 415), and citizen participation varies greatly based on personal interest (Lee, 2022). Sutcliffe (2008) notes that another obstacle to civic participation is that government officials may not want citizens to participate in local politics, particularly if the citizens do not agree with the direction the officials want to take on the issue. This is why citizen-led oppositional movements, such as protests and resistance to local policies, can be harder to organize since they often lack the support of local government officials.

Various demographic and personal factors also affect citizen involvement in local government. Individuals of higher socioeconomic status, those with more education, and older individuals tend to be more active in local government than individuals of lower socioeconomic status, those with lower levels of education, and youth. As people become older, they become more attached to their communities, which may explain their desire to be actively involved in local happenings (de Mello, 2021). Einstein et al. (2019) examined meeting minutes from local zoning and planning board meetings in Massachusetts and concluded that the residents who participated during public comments "were more likely to be older, male, longtime residents, voters in local elections, and homeowners" (Einstein et al., 2019, p. 29). Houston and Ong (2012) found that racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in Los Angeles neighborhood councils. Finally, research shows that people are more likely to participate in local

protests if they are close to others who are highly motivated to participate, meaning that “individuals are influenced by one another in social networks when deciding whether to participate,” and that surrounding oneself with politically active friends is crucial to engagement in local government (Larson et al., 2019, p. 504).

To encourage citizen participation in local government, several communities have used neighborhood councils, built with the sole purpose of inviting individuals to organize locally. Neighborhood councils serve as mediators between neighborhoods and decision-makers and can inform decision-makers of community preferences (Parlow, 2010). For example, Los Angeles, California, created an elected, official government system of neighborhood councils to encourage citizen participation in government on topics such education, neighborhood secession, and minority representation (Houston & Ong, 2012). Although the councils had no formal powers, they were thought to encourage decision-making at the local level at a time when residents were dissatisfied with government operations. Moreover, encouraging residents to take an interest in local happenings may have economic benefits for the community, such as the growth of small businesses or local entrepreneurship (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2019).

In his examination of the debate around the Windsor-Detroit border crossing, which needed infrastructural repairs, Sutcliffe (2008) found that citizen participation was crucial in swaying the council in favor of enacting the repairs. Similarly, several studies have examined the Flint, Michigan, water crisis in connection with civic engagement. According to Howell et al. (2019), Flint community organizers and activists were able to undermine governmental authorities by promoting a counter-narrative of water as a common and human right through the public sharing of individual stories. In another example, Sites (2007) reflected on the anti-Walmart protests that occurred in Chicago in 2004, which saw churches and unions at the local level and advocacy groups at the state level coordinate to push back against Walmart’s planned expansion in the area. “The ensuing struggle dominated local newspaper headlines for a number of weeks and ended up becoming one of the most contentious city council fights in years” (Sites, 2007, p. 2641). While the coalition was ultimately unable to stop Walmart from building more stores, it started important conversations around living wages and big-box stores (Sites, 2007).

Social Media and Civic Engagement

The visibility and reach of social media platforms have made it easy for people to make connections with one another and to engage in discussions about matters of public concern and local politics (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Local government officials and activist groups use social media to address public issues (Seelig et al., 2019) and interact with people through videos, pictures, and comments (Cho et al., 2021). Prior research suggests that social media engagement around public issues can shape offline activities in meaningful ways, and is therefore a highly valuable tool for organizations that want to enact tangible, on-the-ground changes in their community. For example, Piatak and Mikkelsen (2021) found that the “more people participate in political discussions on social media, the more likely they are to participate in the political process offline by attending local meetings, working for political campaigns, or donating to political campaigns” (p. 1095). Cho et al. (2021) echo this finding, noting that leveraging social media platforms to engage residents in local government works best in locations with a wide range of offline interaction opportunities (e.g., townhall meetings) so that people can smoothly move between online and offline participation in their local community.

A growing body of research has specifically examined the use of Facebook and its associations with civic engagement and community organizing (Hong & Kim, 2021; Park et al., 2009; Seelig et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Currently, compared to other social media platforms, Facebook has a greater participation impact on social media activism, perhaps because its users see the platform as having more social and political power and because the platform lends itself to two-way forms of communication through features such as comments and likes (Hong & Kim, 2021). Valenzuela et al. (2009) found that civic engagement is positively associated with peoples’ use of Facebook groups, meaning that the more active people are on Facebook groups, the higher their reported civic engagement. Furthermore, Park et al. (2009) found that one of the reasons people join Facebook groups is to obtain information on a wide range of topics, including politics and local events. They also found that students who use Facebook groups are more likely to organize and support campus activities like parties or meetings than students who are not active on social media.

Looking at the use of social media by government, military, and nonprofit organizations

also offers useful insights about how social media can be used for the public good (Gordon & Trammel, 2016). City agencies, such as the public works department, provide services that affect the daily lives of citizens in that community (Kathi & Cooper, 2005). Increasingly, these agencies turn to social media to share public service announcements and warn residents about new construction projects and road closures, and many nonprofit organizations that provide essential services use social media to reach a wider audience (Gordon & Trammel, 2016).

Local governments and nonprofit organizations often employ a “push” strategy on social media, meaning they focus on getting information out to the public rather than engaging in a two-way dialogue with members of the community. Gordon and Trammel (2016), refer to the push approach as a “noticeboard effect,” and note that it mimics top-down forms of communication often found in corporate environments. Zavattaro et al. (2015) found that social media posts that follow the push or noticeboard approach typically use neutral, information-focused language that does not encourage citizen engagement with local matters. To effectively mobilize community members on social media, Zavattaro et al. (2015) recommend adopting an upbeat, positive tone and drawing on pathos to stand out from other announcements. This finding suggests that local governments need to be aware of the tone of their social media messaging if the goal is to encourage citizen participation.

Besides tone, another challenge many government organizations face is making content accessible and relevant. Levenshus (2016) notes that most people are unfamiliar with the inner workings of government agencies and are not aware of the specific roles and functions various agencies play in the community. For example, one of the social media challenges the Coast Guard faces is that the public “doesn’t understand the military” and may lack personal exposure to the Coast Guard (e.g., living in a landlocked area with no Coast Guard presence), thus making it difficult to get community support on matters related to the Coast Guard’s operations (Levenshus, 2016, p. 182). To maximize engagement from the public, Seelig et al. (2019) suggest creating content and interacting with supporters in a manner that is both informative and memorable. Effective social media content should use verbs and clear calls to action to encourage active listening. One of the greatest affordances of social media is the ability to quickly

share messages with large audiences (Auger, 2013). As such, many organizations encourage their supporters to further spread awareness by reposting information as well as conversing with friends and family about important public issues (Seelig et al., 2019).

Study Context

Community Services and Local Government

“Community services” is an umbrella term for the types of services a local government provides to its residents. Local governments, such as cities or townships, are responsible for emergency medical assistance, parks and recreation services, police and fire departments, housing services, animal and plant control, public works (e.g., road maintenance, sewers, signage, etc.), environment control, and public transportation services (Murray, 1990; The White House, 2023). Community services are financed from the revenue generated from local taxes, such as property taxes, and each year, local governments allocate funds to community services in their annual budget based on expected revenue and cost. How much or little funding certain services receive can impact operations and is often an indication of what local government sees as the community’s civic priorities. If a service is not included in the annual budget, that service is likely to be discontinued.

Emergency dispatch services is the use of a “professional telecommunicator to gather information, assign resources, and coordinate laypersons and emergency responders” during crises (Kashani et al., 2018, p. 343). Dispatch plays a crucial role in everyday emergency operations for local police, fire, and emergency medical services (EMS) and provides communities with a sense of security (Gasaway, 2013; Kashani et al., 2018). Even though their work is not highly visible, dispatch workers occupy a vital function in local communities as a person’s first point of contact during local crises (Gasaway, 2013). Highly trained dispatch workers may even help callers recruit assistance from bystanders or give instructions on how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and other life-saving interventions over the phone—all of which further underscore their crucial function in keeping people alive during emergencies (Kashani et al., 2018).

The Oconomowoc Campaign

In the fall of 2019, when the Common Council of the city of Oconomowoc announced its plans to close the local dispatch center and

move to a larger, county-wide dispatch service, residents quickly expressed safety and quality-of-care concerns and began to organize to save their local dispatch. Rachel, who had been a longtime resident of the community, recognized a chance to both witness and actively participate in this local civic engagement effort and joined the leadership of the Save Oconomowoc Dispatch campaign. The circumstances of this campaign also presented a unique opportunity to see how a local community organized under duress, as Oconomowoc residents only had a few weeks to launch a campaign before the dispatch issue was to be finalized at the next council meeting in November 2019. Since the first author was both a participant and an observer, this study is part autoethnography and part case study. As scholars interested in community organizing and citizen engagement in local government, we ask the following questions:

RQ1: How did the Save Oconomowoc Dispatch campaign unfold in the short time frame residents had to mobilize? What were the key turning points of the campaign?

RQ2: How did the campaign utilize social media to raise awareness about the possible dissolution of the dispatch service and rally community members to help save this community service?

RQ3: Did social media efforts and on-the-ground actions complement each other in this campaign? If so, how?

Methods

Data Collection

As both a case study and an autoethnography, this qualitative project draws on principles of interpretive content analysis and reflexivity (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Given the nature of this study, we collected a range of research materials for analysis.

First, throughout the campaign, Rachel kept detailed fieldnotes about the community's mobilization effort as it unfolded in person and online. These fieldnotes included Rachel's personal campaign planning notes and personal reflections as well as the following artifacts: two letters penned by local residents and addressed to the members of the Common Council that were shared with Rachel so they could be disseminated online, Rachel's letter to the editor published in the local newspaper, and copies of the yard signs that were distributed locally.

Second, we collected all the content posted to the Save Oconomowoc Dispatch Facebook group during the period of the online campaign effort, which lasted from October 8, 2019, to November 5, 2019. The Facebook group was set to "public," meaning that all posts and comments were publicly available and there were no restrictions to joining the group. To collect data from the Facebook group, we scrolled to the beginning of the group's newsfeed and manually collected all posts, including images, through screenshots. We collected 40 images and 58 text posts, for a total of 98 posts.

Third, we collected data from the public-facing Oconomowoc YouTube channel where Common Council meetings are livestreamed and then archived for public access. As of the time of this publication, all the videos on the Oconomowoc YouTube channel are publicly available and can be located with the @oconomowocwi2554 handle. We downloaded the YouTube video of the Common Council meeting on November 5, 2019, and sent the five-hour recording to a professional transcription service. The transcript covers the entirety of the meeting, including local citizen remarks and the final vote on whether to keep the dispatch center.

Data Analysis

We used inductive content analysis (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) and autoethnographic practices of reflexivity (Anderson, 2006; Lauricella, 2018) to analyze the data. First, keeping RQ1 in mind, the authors collectively reviewed all the events leading up to the final vote to save the dispatch to identify key phases in the campaign. The goal of this top-level analysis was to break the campaign down into specific turning points that could then be analyzed in more detail. We identified four key phases: Facebook as an intervention tool, social media outreach, reactions and next steps, and the council meeting.

To analyze the Facebook posts ($n = 98$), we used Taylor and Bogdan's (1998) approach to inductive content analysis. The first step involved reviewing the posts in their entirety to identify memorable content and preliminary themes (e.g., separating posts that focused on organizational logistics from post that highlighted the importance of the dispatch center). In the second step, we systematically coded the Facebook posts by regrouping posts with similar foci. This analysis yielded five educational themes (dispatch functions, dispatch costs, response

times, citizen participation in local government, and explaining how Facebook groups work) and two non-educational themes (emotional appeals and organizational logistics). The same inductive content analysis was used to analyze the transcript of the Common Council meeting. We thoroughly read and coded the transcript of the meeting and identified four key issues: public safety, response times, funding, and personal and community connections.

Lastly, Rachel engaged in autoethnographic reflexivity. This process involved reviewing the events of the campaign while considering how being a full participant in the campaign may have shaped the events and outcome of the mobilization effort. From a writing perspective, utilizing an autoethnographic approach also helped create an effective narrative; by allowing “the researcher’s own feelings and experiences [to be] incorporated into the story,” autoethnography makes it possible for scholars to create personal research narratives that create a unique sense of urgency and meaning around the data (Anderson, 2006, p. 384). As a leader of the campaign, Rachel was uniquely positioned to pull readers into the story of the local Oconomowoc community’s efforts to save their dispatch center (Lauricella, 2018).

Findings

Phase 1: Facebook as an Intervention Tool

In response to the Common Council’s plan to remove the local dispatch center, Rachel’s mother, a dispatch worker, created the Save Oconomowoc Dispatch Facebook group in consultation with other dispatch center employees. They created the Facebook group with the goal to raise awareness about the Common Council’s plans and to explicate the benefits of keeping a local dispatch center. Soon after the Facebook group launched, Rachel offered to help manage the group, allowing her mother to distance herself from the group and avoid any potential perceived conflicts of interest with her job. Over the coming weeks, Oconomowoc residents began to think of Rachel as one of the major leaders in the campaign.

To join the Facebook group, people with Facebook accounts could be added by a moderator or any existing group member. There were no special requirements or restrictions to joining, and the group was set to “public” on Facebook. The group quickly grew to about 600 people by early November 2019. It is important to note that movement leaders turned off the comment function for all posts, which meant that users could only

engage by liking the posts, using reaction emojis, and sharing the posts. Rachel and the other moderators of the group decided to turn off commenting to avoid direct confrontations with WCC and keep the focus of the group on educating community members about dispatch services. In doing so, they used a “push” strategy focused on one-way information dissemination. This differentiates the group’s operating structure from some of the more interactive two-way communication models found in other social media movements.

The introductory post to the group was authored by Rachel’s mother and set the tone for the group’s existence: “Your city council recently in a meeting voted to rescind their unanimous decision made earlier this year and are now voting to take away your city dispatch center. Please do not let this happen!” The post then lists multiple reasons to keep a local dispatch service, including: the benefits of personalized services, local knowledge of dispatchers who are familiar with the city’s landmarks, a strong personal connection between Oconomowoc dispatchers and the police officers, and a low turnover rate among employees.

Two letters from local residents were also shared with the Facebook group. One was a letter from a retired police officer, who stated that the city council was “sacrificing the safety of residents because it’s cheaper [to use WCC].” He characterized the decision to switch to county dispatch as “unreal stupidity” and noted that he had seen firsthand that it can take a while for the county dispatch to actually dispatch first responders to a call. The other letter posted to the group was by an Oconomowoc resident who explained that “real-life examples show time and time again that when dispatch centers consolidate, service suffers, [and that] given the performance and knowledge of our current program, these cost savings would come at a greater cost—the safety of our citizens.” Both letters created a sense of urgency by showing that residents’ safety was at risk if services were switched over to WCC.

Phase 2: Social Media Outreach

Rachel’s main role was to manage the Facebook page. This entailed creating and posting graphics with textual information to educate the community about dispatch services. A lot of the messaging also focused on the need to “save” the dispatch center from dissolution. All posts used the hashtag #SaveOconomowocDispatch as a quick and easy way to associate the Facebook posts with the group’s mobilization effort. The social

media posts centered on five educational themes: dispatch functions, dispatch costs, response times, citizen participation in local government, and explaining how Facebook groups work. The remaining posts focused on either emotional appeals or meeting reminders.

Educational Themes. Five educational themes emerged: dispatch functions and responsibilities, dispatch costs, response times, citizens' ability to participate in the local government, and explaining how Facebook groups work.

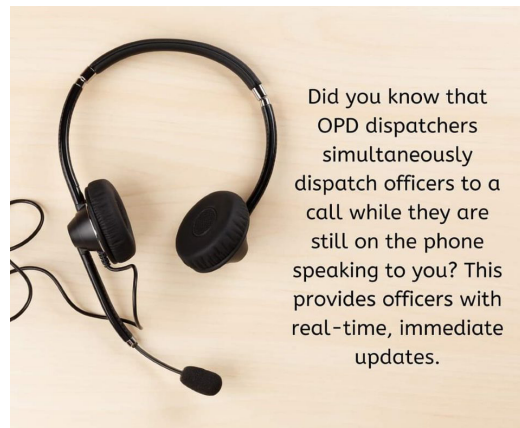
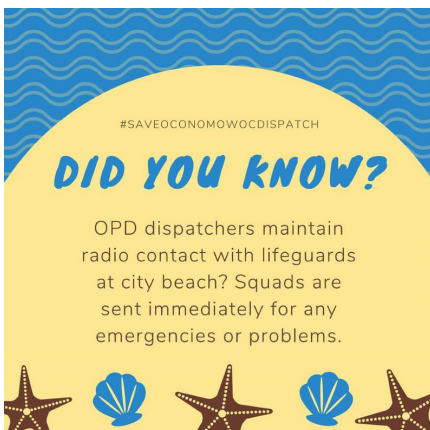
Dispatch Functions. The first theme focused on educating community members about the functions and responsibilities of the dispatch service, such as the fact that dispatchers maintain radio contact with the lifeguards at City Beach and that the dispatch center serves as the after-hours contact for the pound and utilities. Besides highlighting the scope of a dispatcher's job, these posts also emphasized the quality and immediacy of the services provided to the community and situated dispatch responsibilities within broader discussions about community services and policing (see Figure 1).

Dispatch Costs. The second theme centered on the cost of keeping dispatch local compared to switching to WCC. Overall, this difference was roughly \$5 per household. This small cost difference gave Rachel the idea to connect the price of a cup of coffee to the effort to save the dispatch. This was a simple, easy-to-grasp comparison that residents could effortlessly remember (see Figure 2).

Response Times. The third theme focused on response times, namely how long it takes for an Oconomowoc dispatcher to get an officer headed towards the caller's emergency. The goal behind including this information was to help community members realize the importance of a quick response. When they call the dispatch center, they typically need someone right away, and a quick response time is crucial to getting individuals the help they need (see Figure 3).

Citizen Participation in Local Government. The fourth theme emphasized peoples' ability to participate in local government. These posts encouraged community members to make their voices and opinions heard, especially by contacting the alderman for their district and

Figure 1. Examples of Dispatch Function Posts



Oconomowoc Dispatch is a vital part of community policing. Help us fight to keep it where it belongs in the heart of this city.

Figure 2. Examples of Dispatch Costs Posts



Figure 3. Examples of Response Time Posts



Figure 4. Examples of Citizen Participation Posts



sharing their support for keeping dispatch local. (Aldermen make up the Common Council and are the decision-making body for the city.) Posts often included links to the city of Oconomowoc’s government website, including pages where the aldermen’s district and contact information was located (see Figure 4).

Facebook Groups. The final educational theme focused on explaining how Facebook groups work and encouraging current members to add people to the group or like and share graphics so that the movement would grow (see Figure 5).

Emotional Appeals. The next theme focused on emotional appeals. These posts aimed to create an emotional connection between residents and their dispatch center. Posts included references to the fact that it was time for the community to step up and help dispatchers, just as the dispatchers help the community each day. While the educational themes described earlier focused on giving supporters factual information, emotional appeals worked to connect people to the issue on an emotional level (see Figure 6).

Figure 5. Examples of Posts Explaining the Purpose of the Facebook Group



Figure 6. Examples of Emotional Appeals Posts



Meeting Reminders. The final theme involved meeting reminders. These posts encouraged people to attend upcoming meetings and make public comments in support of keeping the local dispatch. These posts also provided general meeting information, such as time, place, and specific directions on how to sign up to speak at the meeting (see Figure 7).

Phase 3: Reactions and Next Steps

As the movement began to pick up speed, it attracted the attention of Oconomowoc’s aldermen, many of whom were displeased with the campaign’s efforts. One alderman even took to his professional Facebook page to refute the need to “save” the dispatch service by citing budgetary concerns and safety issues. Rachel also wrote a letter to the editor for the *Oconomowoc Enterprise*, the local newspaper. In the letter, she pointed

out that only one year earlier, in July of 2018, the Council voted unanimously to *keep* the dispatch center. She also explained that as Oconomowoc continues to grow, its public services must grow, too, and that includes its own local dispatch center.

Around this time, Rachel and her mother worked together with a former Oconomowoc police officer to design, print, and deliver yard signs for community members to display. The signs included the campaign’s hashtag, #SaveOconomowocDispatch, and information about upcoming meetings. The yard signs were also advertised in the Facebook group and people who wanted them could reach out to the organizers to receive one (see Figure 8). The yard signs were part of a final effort to raise awareness about the possible dissolution of the local dispatch services and encourage local residents to attend the meeting and speak up. In the days before the

Figure 7. Examples of Meeting Reminder Posts



Figure 8. Examples of Yard Signs



SHARE YOUR SIGN

Take a picture of your sign and post it on your timeline. Be sure to include #SaveOconomowocDispatch along with a short explanation. Let’s get the word out and pack the meeting room with supporters on Tuesday!

DON'T HAVE A SIGN YET? PM ME AND I'LL MAKE SURE YOU GET ONE!



meeting, Rachel and other moderators of the Facebook group shared basic reminders as well as a list of “key points” that community members could bring up during the meeting.

Phase 4: The Council Meeting

The final phase of the campaign was the Common Council meeting on November 5, 2019. During the public comment section, a total of 21 citizens spoke, 19 of whom spoke in favor of keeping dispatch. After the public commenting portion wrapped up, two presentations occurred, one about WCC and one about Oconomowoc dispatch, and then the aldermen publicly debated the information. Ultimately, the aldermen voted 7 to 1 to keep the local dispatch center. During their public comments throughout the meeting, many of the citizen speakers reiterated points from the social media campaign in support of local dispatch services.

The first discussion point of the meeting focused on the safety benefits of keeping dispatch local to Oconomowoc. During the public comments section, one citizen noted that it is important to keep dispatch local because that way residents know they are receiving personalized service. Another citizen stated, “You cannot put a price on public safety. My understanding is that our dispatchers live here. They do ride-alongs with the police. They know the community, they know the streets.” This was echoed by the dispatchers themselves. One dispatcher stated, “We know our officers personally ... we know what every tone of their voice indicates.” During the WCC presentation, the speaker pointed out that several Oconomowoc residents work at WCC, so that local element would still exist in some form if services were switched to the county—yet community members did not appear to be swayed by this remark.

Next, the discussion shifted to response times and how the switch to WCC might delay emergency responses. The dispatch representative mentioned that WCC has not implemented a shorter transfer system, even though Oconomowoc has asked them to adjust their call-taking system to make the transfer faster. The current estimate is a 43-second delay. Those in favor of keeping dispatch local emphasized the benefits of a shorter response time that is believed to come with a personalized, local dispatch service.

Several citizens referenced the relatively low cost per household of keeping the center, even mentioning the cup of coffee comparison

established during the social media campaign. One citizen stated that “the cost of a cup of coffee is not worth everything that losing our dispatchers will result in.” Another said, “for the cost of a coffee, we cannot seriously be thinking of losing those seconds at the expense of any resident or visitor. And for that cost of a coffee, I will pay his share,” a reference to a citizen who disapproved of keeping dispatch.

For some, keeping dispatch local was not just about safety or saving money, it was a personal issue. One of the aldermen noted that police officers felt a strong personal connection to the local dispatch service. He said he “could see it in [the police officers’] eyes when they told [him] how important dispatch was to them. How much safer they felt ... how they really, really appreciate [their] dispatch officers and what they do for them ... and sometimes money’s not the most important thing.”

Discussion

This paper uses the case study of a small Wisconsin community’s efforts to save its local dispatch service to show that when local residents take sustained collective action, they can make a difference in their local community. Most interestingly, our findings show that an online push campaign, focused on one-way information sharing, can be sufficient to help residents recognize the importance of local services and motivate them to take offline action.

We identified four key phases to the campaign: setting up Facebook as an intervention tool, social media outreach, reactions and next steps, and the council meeting. The first two phases focus on online engagement while the last two highlight on-the-ground efforts that heavily draw on the information presented in the social media campaign. Together, these four phases shed light on the importance of creating community-driven efforts that span spatial boundaries and seamlessly combine online and face-to-face opportunities for engagement to maximize resident support. We found that social media platforms, such as the Facebook group used in the Save Oconomowoc Dispatch campaign, play a crucial role in educating residents about important local issues and encourage them to channel their newly acquired knowledge into concrete offline actions.

Research on the role of social media for community organizing and civic engagement often focuses on opportunities to connect and interact with like-minded individuals (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Piatak & Mikkelsen, 2021; Skoric et al., 2016).

Seelig et al. (2019) note that one of the appeals of social media in the context of civic engagement is that it can “encourage communication and interaction among interested supporters about important social issues, both online and offline” (p. 26). Most studies on social media engagement highlight this interactive, two-way communication component of online movements. By turning off the commenting function in their Facebook group, the leaders of the Oconomowoc campaign greatly limited how users could engage with each other and potentially stifled dialogue around the issue, as users were only able to respond through reaction emojis or by sharing the post. While these types of responses provided some opportunities for interaction, they lacked the richer, more detailed interaction that happens through commenting and online discussions (Hong & Kim, 2021; Seelig et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2009). The Save Oconomowoc Dispatch campaign leaders’ decision to rely on one-way information sharing to achieve their educational and pathos appeals thus went against common beliefs about online engagement and community mobilizing in digital spaces (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Skoric et al., 2016). Yet we found that the campaign, despite its use of a one-way push approach, was still able to mobilize residents and motivate them to speak up at the in-person council meeting. This suggests that extensive online deliberation is not a requirement for effective community organizing.

Our analysis of the campaign’s social media content revealed five educational themes: dispatch functions, dispatch costs, response times, citizen participation in local government, and explaining how Facebook groups work. These posts offered insights into the value and logistics of keeping dispatch services local, which in turn, provided local residents with the resources needed to take offline action. Posts that focused on meeting reminders as well as posts that used emotional appeals were crucial in creating a sense of urgency and helped Oconomowoc residents see that this was a local issue that required their immediate participation. Although interaction was primarily passive, the Facebook group’s focus on education and information sharing drew on important principles of community organizing and civic engagement by highlighting the vital role of residents in local government. As Parlow states, “when community stakeholders are not engaged in the functioning of their government, it is more difficult for them to hold their elected officials accountable” (2010, p. 91). The campaign’s

Facebook group directly gave residents the knowledge they needed to intervene in the city’s announcement to dismantle the local dispatch center. The choice to focus on education rather than interaction also resonates with past research that warns about the challenges of engaging the public in complex issues about the inner workings of government agencies as individuals may lose interest or motivation when faced with difficult bureaucratic structures (Levenshush, 2016). By providing information on things such as dispatch functions, dispatch costs, and response times, the Facebook group helped bridge a possible knowledge gap, thus helping residents feel more empowered and better prepared to participate in offline activities.

The effectiveness of a push approach that limits interaction and instead focuses on educating community members is best illustrated in the fact that residents brought up educational points from the social media campaign during the public comment section of the in-person council meeting—in particular, the \$5 coffee-cup analogy. As one of the leaders of the movement, Rachel created this analogy and much of the educational content that local residents came to associate with the movement. The way this analogy resonated with community members speaks to the fact that “autoethnographers should expect to be involved in the construction of meaning and values in the social worlds they investigate” (Anderson, 2006, p. 384). While Rachel did not initially intend on investigating this topic, the implications for public safety communication research immediately stood out to her. So, while her focus was on saving Oconomowoc Dispatch, the idea of an analysis of the issue at hand remained at the back of her mind. During analysis, it also became clear to Rachel that it is much harder to academically and professionally analyze an event that you also spearheaded. Having an unassociated co-author provides balance and alternative insights.

The fact that community organizers only had a short time (about a month) to mobilize residents and encourage participation at the upcoming council meeting may also explain the success of a push strategy over one that emphasizes deliberation. Disabling commenting helped focus the campaign and allowed moderators to emphasize the educational and informational components of the community effort. Had moderators promoted discussion on the issue instead, it is possible the education efforts would have been overlooked.

Lastly, although turning off commenting may have limited users' interactions in the Facebook group, the use of a shared hashtag, #SaveOconomowocDispatch, across social media posts and offline materials such as the yard signs may have helped create a sense of unity around the effort to save the local dispatch. This aligns with observations by Hong and Kim (2021), who note that hashtags connect people with one another both online and offline. Using the hashtags on yard signs was a way to connect the social media campaign to traditional, in-person civic engagement contexts and helped signal that the community was active both online and offline (Cho et al., 2021; Piatak & Mikkelsen, 2021).

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that social media tools are an important element of community organizing and that citizen-led campaigns can help residents feel empowered and better prepared to take real-world action. Specifically, we find that campaigns do not necessarily need to include a strong online discussion or deliberation component to mobilize residents. Instead, when well-executed, a push or noticeboard approach to social media engagement that emphasizes sharing information and educating community members can be sufficient to motivate residents to speak up in offline contexts. We also find that the Save Oconomowoc Dispatch campaign raised awareness about the vital functions dispatchers play in local communities thanks to the informational and educational tone of its social media content.

Although the residents of Oconomowoc stopped the dissolution of their local dispatch service through the community effort analyzed in this manuscript, their success was only short lived. In the fall of 2021, the city held another vote on the matter, and this time, representatives voted in favor of switching over to a county-wide dispatch system. Many of the community members who spearheaded the first campaign were unavailable to help organize a second mobilization effort, and the lack of community-driven pushback likely explains why the Common Council succeeded in dismantling the dispatch center the second time around. Future research on community mobilizing is needed to examine the long-term impacts of citizen-led initiatives to get a better sense of how they shape local government over time. This is especially relevant as funding for small departments continues to dry up.

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