Digital technology and impact assessment in New Zealand

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To what extent are our well-entrenched institutional processes for impact assessment changing to accommodate and take advantage of digital technology? Given the obvious potential of social media for impact assessment, are our processes adapting accordingly? Or is digital technology simply being used to cut costs and increase the efficiency of service delivery for the benefit of authorities?

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the research was to examine council use of digital technology and especially social media in formal impact assessment processes in New Zealand. We focused on access to information, and facilitating public involvement.

A little background….Impact assessment in New Zealand

In New Zealand, under the Resource Management Act, even small proposals need an "assessment of environmental effects" (AEE) if they require resource consents of some kind. The AEE (or impact assessment) for small proposals may only be a few paragraphs while at the other end of the scale are major projects, with more traditional impact reports

The vast bulk of the 35,000 or so (in 2012) resource consent applications, with their AEEs, are handled by territorial and regional councils. Consequently, the New Zealand impact assessment system is highly integrated with planning/resource management decision making and largely the realm of local/regional government.

Methods

Access to information: how easily can the public can find out about the AEE process and locate current resource consent applications on council websites. We also looked at the use of databases, to organise resource consent applications or to make environmental data more available to the public.

Public involvement: we looked at the use of some of the main social media tools: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and the use of web-streaming of meetings.

All New Zealand councils were included in the research: 6 *unitary authorities* (which have both regional and district council powers); 11 *regional councils* (mainly concerned with air, water and soil condition, waste management, etc.); 60 *territorial councils* (mainly concerned with land use, building, etc.), including 10 city councils.

Media	Comments
Websites	All councils use websites as their main means of contact with their communities. Most sites are well designed and easy to navigate, but a small proportion need improvement. Resource consent information is usually easy to locate, but specific advice on how to provide an AEE is very patchy: two thirds provide *minimal* guidance or *none* at all. Where information is provided, most councils cite relevant sections of the RMA and/or refer people to the Ministry for the Environment guide on preparing an AEE. Very few explain the nature and purpose of the AEE, or provide models for people to follow.
Databases	Previous resource consents, and especially their AEEs, are not generally available. Some councils, mainly regional councils, are starting to provide information on existing consents in their GIS systems, but these are not linked to the original application documents. More councils are using GIS systems to allow the public to view mapped environmental information about their area online, but ironically the systems are often slow and cumbersome to use due to their demands on bandwidth
Facebook and Twitter	61 of the 77 councils have active Facebook sites, mainly to provide information to the public about all aspects of council activities. Relatively few invite comments; a number of sites have even disabled public postings. Where public posts were permitted, in several cases the councils seemed to be "sanitizing" feedback by removing negative comments about council business or a consent application. 40 councils use Twitter, mainly in very similar ways to Facebook: alerting people to topics and events, inviting their response via other mechanisms.
Video streaming	We had hoped to see at least a few councils live streaming public hearings for resource consents. None do this. A few councils stream live video coverage of council meetings and make recordings available online (via website or YouTube) but none seem to do this for consent hearings. Similarly, there is no apparent use of video or Skype to allow live submissions to hearings from people unable to attend in person. [*Written submissions have to be lodged 2 weeks before a hearing, so inability to attend and speak to the submission is not strictly a barrier to influencing the decision, but it probably reduces the impact of the submission and limits the submitter's involvement in proceedings*.]
YouTube	32 councils have YouTube channels. Content varies from videos of council meetings, to information about changes in services, advice on waste minimisation, info on new facilities, background info ahead of consultation, recordings of workshops as part of consultation, etc. Little evidence that YouTube is being used to support the impact assessment process (e.g. audiovisual guides to AEE production, or to the submission process, etc.)

Preliminary conclusions

New Zealand councils seem to be fitting digital technologies to their existing modes of operation rather than seeking to change processes in innovative ways to improve IA effectiveness, such as by the development of better guidance for consent applicants, models of good AEE practice, and project-specific guidance based on previous AEEs. Public involvement could also be enhanced by improving access to applications, web streaming hearings, allowing verbal presentations via Skype or equivalent software.

During the research we examined a number of large projects and found limited use of digital technology, especially social media, in the AEE process. At the same time, blogs, Twitter feeds, and Facebook groups have been used to organise opposition to specific projects. This all suggests that the formal, institutionalised process could be increasingly out of step with community expectations of good process. The long term outcome is likely to be lower levels of public involvement, especially among younger people, but also quicker recourse to alternative methods for expressing opposition to contentious proposals.

How can we ensure formal IA processes change as society changes, and as our concepts of good practice evolve? How do we overcome institutional conservatism and entrenched practice to deliver more effective, responsive IA processes?