

# Reflecting on the use of social media within a scenario planning project

Maureen Meadows, Open University Business School

Frances O'Brien, Warwick Business School

# Introduction

- Scenario planning is a tool which captures multiple futures that an organisation may face
- The scenario planning process is often participative and conducted in a facilitated workshop setting, requiring people to be physically present in order to participate
- However, a variety of social media exist which allow people to interact with each other virtually, and in real time
- This paper explores the potential for social media, and in particular Twitter, to be used to facilitate and encourage engagement with workshops, beyond those physically attending the workshop
- We describe and reflect on the use of social media within a project to develop scenarios for the future of the food system within Birmingham for 2050

# Participation in scenario planning

- Identifying key stakeholders was one of the ten steps in the scenario planning process at Royal Dutch Shell (Schoemaker, 1995)
- Different contexts, with significant variation in participation, e.g. African agriculture (De Grassi, 2007), environmental decision-making (Videira et al, 2003)
- Such exercises see the aim of participation as being around “increasing shared understanding of the problems, which is likely to drive consensus and commitment towards action; and internalising the public’s values, assumptions and preferences, which reduces the level of conflict among stakeholders and fosters trust in institutions” (Videira et al., 2003, p 443)

# Analysing social media data

- Few existing examples of an analysis of social media data in strategy development exercises
- Park (2013) explored the interrelationships between opinion leadership, Twitter use and political engagement; Twitter opinion leadership significantly contributed to an individual's involvement in political processes while Twitter use itself did not influence political engagement
- How can non-profit organisations engage with stakeholders and encourage donor engagement? (Smitko, 2012; Lovejoy et al 2012)
- In a marketing context, a number of studies have explored how social media is used to support marketing activities within organisations (e.g. Hanna et al, 2011; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011)

# Case study setting

- A year-long scenario-based project run by the New Optimists, a Birmingham based not-for-profit organisation
- Considering food futures for Birmingham in 2050
- Six events run over a year, involving a range of local scientists - from informal dinner gatherings to larger workshops
- Each event was supported with live social media reporting - live Twitter postings to encourage and facilitate engagement and further discussion by non-attendees
- Tweets were collected and analysed (Microsoft Excel)
- Patterns in the data were explored e.g. the distribution of tweets across categories and events; and a content analysis of the tweets was carried out

# Over 40 participants from.....

## ◎ Scientific / Professional backgrounds

- Architecture
- Biochemistry
- Bio-energy & bio-refining
- Chemical engineering
- Computer science
- Entomology
- Food distribution
- Geography
- Horticulture
- Plant science
- Primary care
- Public Health Nutrition
- Spatial planning & governance
- Veterinary epidemiology

## ◎ Participating institutions

- Aston Uni
- Warwick Uni
- Birmingham Uni
- Birmingham City Uni
- Warwick Crop Centre
  
- Birmingham City Council
  
- Minor Weir & Willis
- IBM
- Sustaination
- Taglis Systems
- Martineau Community Gardens
- Westland nurseries

## Research questions

- Who engages with the project using social media?
- How is social media used within the project?
- Is there evidence that the use of social media encourages wider participation in the project?
- Issues of temporality: is there a disconnect, when attempting to use social media (“in-the-moment”) in the context of long term strategic planning?

# Data gathering

- Dataset consists of tweets made by the New Optimists, and others involved in the project who were either project participants, facilitators or members of the social media team
- Tweets were coded according to their type (e.g. tweet, retweet, reply) and the nature of the content.
- The initial dataset consisted of 1718 tweets made by @newoptimists and some 22,500 tweets made by the others
- Tweets not tweeted directly by newoptimists were subjected to a 'cleaning' process, which used a systematic keyword search to find tweets related to the project. Examples of the terms used include #TNOFOOD, Birmingham, newoptimists, and food. After cleaning this second set, 3776 tweets remained.



# Analysis

- The two collections of tweets were then inspected for relevance to the project, leaving 983 and 443 tweets by the newoptimists and others respectively. The tweets were allocated codes to indicate when they were made in relation to an event, i.e. before the event, during the event or after the event.
- Their content was coded according to the following categories:
  - *Advertising*
  - *Communication* covered any tweet that was involved in informal conversation
  - *Event content* covered material that had been published from the events themselves,
  - *Wider marketing* covered tweets such as those designed to provoke discussion or a commentary on the New Optimists beyond the six events.
  - *Miscellaneous*

# Results

- Twitter was being used to support the scenario process
  - It supported communication between participants between the events
  - It promoted material generated during the events, e.g. participant quotes, and fragments of video and audio such as interviews with participants.
- Twitter was also used to:
  - Post commentary on events;
  - Post prompts to encourage participation from those not present;
  - Market future events and promote wider interest in related topics.

## Discussion (1)

- This study suggests that there may be scope for future use of social media in such projects to support participation
- This may be most appropriate in the 'divergent' stages of the scenario process where wide participation and idea generation/input are encouraged to support a successful outcome of the project
- Examples would include the brainstorming of external factors that might drive the scenarios, the generation of themes behind possible scenarios, and the generation of strategic options for the focal organisation

## Discussion (2)

- However, in this instance, we did not find strong evidence of wide scale engagement beyond the core of ‘activists’
  - So, in order to achieve wider participation, a project team probably requires a clear strategy for getting ‘outsiders’ interested in the project and creating a following
  - A following on social media is unlikely to simply emerge, but has to be built via careful planning
- Within the project, Twitter was typically used to:
  - advertise events and their content
  - share information and commentary amongst activists.
- Little evidence of incoming Twitter activity fed live into forum events
- Various definitions of ‘engagement’ are possible; we have not observed ‘passive’ participation

# Reflections on temporality

- “The medium is the message” (e.g. McLuhan and Fiore, 1967)
- The form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived
- Learning under continuity entails the (1) assessment of present courses of action; (2) exploration of future courses of action; (3) re-interpretation of past courses of action (Hernes and Irgens, 2012)
- People in organisations experience time through the shared *temporal structures* they enact recurrently in their everyday practices (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002)
- Structuring communication and work process is an important mechanism for the temporal coordination of dispersed activities (Im, Yates and Orlikowski, 2005)