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Action Brokering for Civic Engagement: A Case Study of ACTION Alexandria

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by

Jes A. Koepfler
Graduate Research Associate
iPAC, University of Maryland

Derek L. Hansen
Affiliate Faculty,
Assistant Professor,
Brigham Young University

Paul T. Jaeger, Ph.D., J.D.
Co-Director and Professor
iPAC, University of Maryland

John Carlo Bertot, Ph.D.
Co-Director and Professor
iPAC, University of Maryland

Tracy Viselli, Community Manager
ACTION Alexandria

Abstract

Local communities are turning to new online civic engagement platforms to help motivate and coordinate local volunteerism and problem solving. Inspired by the American barn raising tradition, ACTion Alexandria is designed to help local residents and service-oriented organizations collectively take action to address pressing local needs (see <http://www.actionalexandria.org/>). Through the combination of a novel website, social media, a community manager, and institutional support, ACTion Alexandria serves as an "action brokering platform" to connect residents, nonprofits, and local government. This chapter defines action brokering platforms and frames them within a year-long evaluation of ACTion Alexandria, focusing on the social practices and technical features used to facilitate action brokering. The findings are based on a case study that employed multiple methods from multiple data sources across stakeholder groups. ACTion Alexandria's key successes were attributed to a competent community manager, institutional support from an existing nonprofit brokering agency, effective use of social media, a synergistic partnership process with nonprofits that helped grow each group's donor network, and emphasis on promoting immediate actions and soliciting ideas for community challenges among residents and nonprofit organizations.

Introduction

In early rural American life, the barn raising tradition arose out of necessity; small efforts and contributions from large numbers of people were required to construct a building that would benefit the larger community as a whole. Brought together by the harsh realities of frontier living, settlers responded to the needs of their community and peers. Whether motivated by altruism, an expectation of a returned favor, or devotion to a shared value system, the resulting collective action helped build strong social ties as well as physical structures within communities.

Today, we are still faced with challenges as monumental as barn raising that require as many community hands to construct, like ensuring community food pantries are stocked to feed the hungry and rebuilding homes after a natural disaster strikes. Social technologies like community listservs, wikis, and other communication and idea generation tools enable individuals to contribute in small ways to issues they care about. However, there is an increasing need to move from individual actions to collaborative or community efforts to address real social challenges. Though existing social media tools like Twitter (www.twitter.com) or Facebook (www.facebook.com) are widely used to help promote collective action, fewer systems are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of collective civic participation.

A major challenge of enabling civic participation is the pairing of those who are willing to take action with those who have legitimate needs. In the increasingly compartmentalized and busy lives of everyday citizens, individuals are often unaware of the most pressing needs in their local communities. When community problems are known, it is not always clear how one can contribute or collaborate in an unstructured, volunteer-based environment. These challenges point to the need for intermediaries to help match potential actors (i.e. volunteers) with those in need, as well as the nonprofits and government agencies that serve them.

In this paper, we discuss ACTion Alexandria (www.actionalexandria.com), a civic participation platform designed to promote local collective action in the Alexandria, Virginia community. The ACTion Alexandria platform uses social structures and online tools to support a critical community function that we call *action brokering* – the intermediation between those performing and those organizing civic participation activities (see next section). We use a case study approach to identify the social practices and technical features used by ACTion Alexandria to implement action brokering. Our analysis highlights the key factors for their successes, as well as challenges they face in implementing an action brokering platform. We end by discussing the policy implications of action brokering platforms and recapping best practices learned from the case study.

Action Brokering Platforms

Action Brokering

This section introduces the novel concept of action brokering, its evolution, and the differences between it and other strategies for online civic engagement. Action brokering is best defined by describing its core elements:

Action: The word “action” connotes “something that is done or performed, a deed, an act” (OED, action, N.D.). In the context of civic participation, actions include acts of service (e.g., labor), provision of resources (e.g., items, money, access), sharing of expertise, and the active promotion of a cause. Actions are the primary goal of civic participation initiatives that aim to promote prosocial behaviors. The needs and interests of the specific community determine the nature and scope of the actions that are undertaken and the prosocial behaviors that will result.

Brokering: The word “brokering” connotes an intermediary actor who negotiates an exchange between two parties (OED, broker, N.D.). The primary responsibility of a broker in a traditional sense is to bring together buyers or sellers in a financial context. In the context of civic action, action brokers help match individuals interested in performing actions, called *action seekers* (e.g., community members as potential volunteers), with those who help organize and offer actions, called *action providers* (e.g., nonprofits or government agencies who work on behalf of individuals in need), in order to address social issues. Brokering may also occur between organizations who share a common mission, but who would not otherwise know about one another or be able to work together effectively without the intermediary.

Thus, in the context of civic participation, action brokering is the intermediation between those performing and those organizing civic participation activities. Action brokering happens when a friend invites you to serve with them on the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association), when a religious congregation encourages its members to serve at the local soup kitchen, and when the local county volunteer center distributes a calendar of service events to email subscribers. In all of these cases an individual or organization plays the role of a third party broker helping to match up those seeking out or capable of volunteering with those organizing such activities. As the examples illustrate, many different individuals and organizations play the role of an action broker either formally or informally.

There are several benefits of action brokering. As in the financial world, the advantage of using a broker for community action is that the broker has a comprehensive view of the market and has established relationships with the different parties. Maintaining a comprehensive network of connections takes considerable time and effort. By delegating social network maintenance to a broker, individuals and organizations can devote their scarce resources, primarily time, to their own domain, yet remain connected via the broker to potential partnerships. In addition, brokers can effectively organize collective efforts that would not be feasible for disconnected groups to perform on their own.

Action Brokering Platforms

Though a significant amount of action brokering happens informally, new socio-technical systems are being developed to facilitate action brokering through more structured approaches. We call these systems “action brokering platforms.” We use the term platform broadly to encompass the technology, policies, social structures and practices of a socio-technical system. The term platform is particularly appropriate given that several of its definitions evoke notions of civic participation:

Platform: Broadly speaking, a platform is “the ground, foundation, or basis of an action, event, calculation, condition, etc.” (OED, platform, N.D.). It evokes civic action and ideas when it serves as a place “to speak about (an issue, etc.) on a public platform; to set out as part of a political platform, to campaign for [something]” (OED, platform, N.D.). There is an increasing emphasis on understanding novel governance platforms designed to support active participation in civic life (Johnston & Hansen, 2011; Lathrop & Ruma, 2010). Though a great amount of attention has focused on technical aspects of platforms, social roles and practices such as community managers and policies relating to the use of technical platforms are core elements of the platform as well.

Action Brokering Platform Environment

The action brokering platform environment is presented in Figure 1. As shown, brokering occurs between action seekers and action providers. Brokering is mediated by the social practices and technical features of the action brokering platform. A single individual or organization may serve as an action seeker at one time and an action provider at another time depending on the situation. For example, a resident may seek out volunteer opportunities at the local homeless shelter, and later provide such opportunities to others when organizing a neighborhood cleanup.



Figure 1: Action Brokering Platform Environment

Examples of Action Brokering Platforms

There has been an increase in action brokering platforms over the last few years, fueled largely by advances in social media. Some examples include ChangeMakers (<http://www.changemakers.com/>), Taking IT Global (<http://www.tigweb.org/>), and Give a Minute (<http://www.giveaminute.info/>). These sites, and others like them, demonstrate the range of strategies that platforms can use to enable action brokering at a scale and pace difficult to realize in the pre-web era.

Changemakers by Ashoka describes itself as a "global community of action" (Ashoka Changemakers, 2012). This site brokers actions primarily in the form of ideas (also referred to as ideagoras by Tapscott & Williams (2006)). Through Changemakers, "Innovators" (i.e. action providers) share a novel solution to a problem in their community using the online platform. "Advocates" (i.e. action seekers) seek out ideas from Innovators and volunteer their skills and time to help Innovators meet their goals. In this way, the online platform, along with the people, policies, and activities that support it, serves as a hub for brokering the exchange of ideas and action.

TakingITGlobal is similar in concept to Changemakers, but its primary target audience is youth and young adults ages 13-30 and their schools and teachers. The TakingITGlobal online community is comprised of educators interested in partnering with other classrooms around the world to facilitate international learning partnerships. A section of the website called "Action Tools" is the section most relevant to action brokering (see Figure 2).

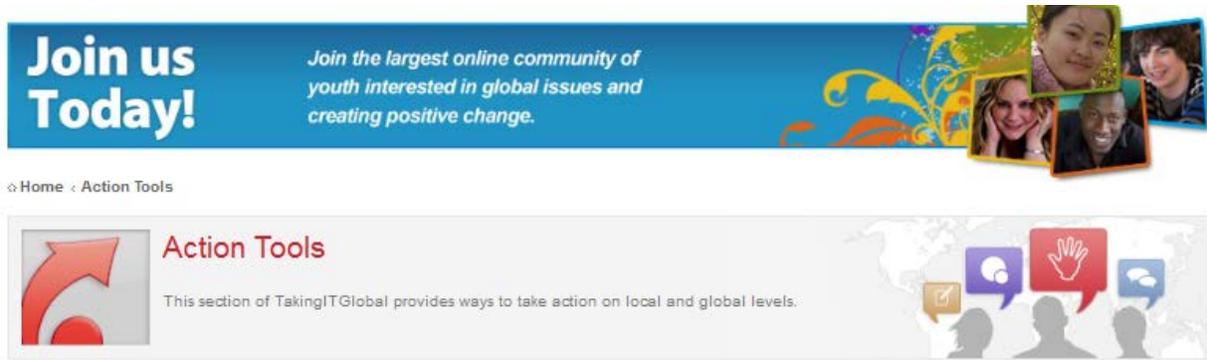


Figure 2. Screen capture of TakingITGlobal Action Tools description, which is the action brokering section of the website targeting youth and young adults.

The types of actions that are brokered include “commitments” in the form of pledges, “petitions” which individuals can sign and share, and “featured actions” which take the form of challenges (e.g., eat a “Low Carbon Lunch” that is comprised of local, organic, and waste free components) and educational opportunities (e.g., register for a live webcast to listen to a scientist talk about deforestation).

Changemakers and TakingITGlobal both seek to broker actions at a global level. A third example, Give a Minute, is an action brokering platform that brokers actions at the city level. Currently it is active in Chicago, IL, Memphis, TN, New York, NY, and San Jose, CA in the United States. The participants of this community are citizens as idea generators (i.e. action seekers) and community leaders from the private and public sector (i.e. action providers) who “listen” to the ideas that are posted to the site and review and respond to them (see Figure 3). The primary action that the platform brokers is “dialogue”, or the brief exchange of ideas about ways to improve a specific problem. The platform describes itself as “an opportunity for you to think out loud; address old problems with fresh thinking; and to enter into dialogue with change-making community leaders” (<http://giveaminute.info/>, description under link called “What is this?”).

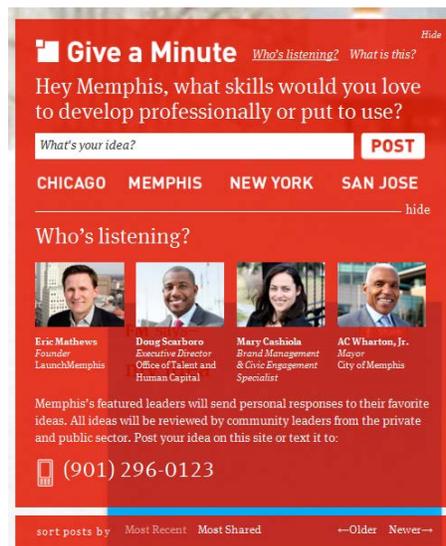


Figure 3. Screen capture of Give a Minute community leaders from Memphis, TN, who are “listening” to the ideas that are generated by citizens.

As these examples show, action brokering platforms serve citizens and communities from local to global levels, supporting the exchange of actions, ideas, and challenges in an effort to tackle social problems and improve civic life.

Designating these websites as action brokering platforms draws attention to their common role as action brokers and suggests that strategies that are successful in one community may be applied or adapted to the others. In addition to the three examples presented above, other action brokering sites include Changeby.us (<http://changeby.us/>), which brokers ideas between citizens and local city governments and BeNeighbors.org (<http://forums.e-democracy.org/twincities?beneighbors>), which brokers ideas and information between citizens. There are many others like these sites that broker actions and ideas at the local, state, country, or global levels, though few studies have evaluated their effectiveness due to their novelty. The following case study of ACTion Alexandria, a city-level action brokering platform, illustrates the potential that such platforms have for solving community problems through the integration of social practices and technical features.

ACTion Alexandria Platform

ACTion Alexandria is an action brokering platform designed to promote civic engagement in Alexandria, VA. In this chapter, we report on the first year of its implementation and the months leading up to its launch, which occurred on February 7, 2011. The platform includes a website (<http://www.actionalexandria.org/>; Figure 4), a Twitter account (@ACTionAlexVA), Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/ACTionAlexandria>), a paid Community Manager responsible for the day-to-day operations and outreach efforts, a steering committee, and policies and procedures that underlie its use.

The platform is an initiative of the City's community foundation called ACT for Alexandria (www.actforalexandria.org), which serves as a catalyst for increasing charitable donations in the community. ACT and the City of Alexandria helped raise funding for the development of the ACTion Alexandria platform from local nonprofit organizations and a Community Information Challenge grant from the John S. and James L. Knight foundation.



Figure 4. Screen capture of ACTion Alexandria homepage, an action brokering platform for Alexandria, VA.

ACTion Alexandria seeks to “empower citizens to take collective action on behalf of themselves and local organizations” (ACTion Alexandria, 2011). Its three main goals are to:

- Create a vibrant online platform that inspires offline action, where challenges are posted, solutions are debated, successes and failures are archived, data is both disseminated and captured, stories are shared, and essential civic relationships are developed.
- Improve the quality of life for its most vulnerable residents in a cost-efficient manner through a platform that provides everyone a voice and the opportunity to identify problems and offer solutions.
- Engage residents and business people in problem solving to strengthen community ties and increase each individual's stake in creating positive outcomes for specific community problems. (ACTion Alexandria, 2011)

ACTion Alexandria attempts to achieve these goals through a variety of mechanisms that help residents connect with local nonprofit organizations and government agencies. First, community members can seek out and complete *actions* – small donations of items, funds, or volunteer efforts that are posted by a local nonprofit or government agency. Second, residents and organizations can help brainstorm and vote on *ideas* to community challenges identified by ACTion Alexandria and the greater Alexandria philanthropic community. *Actions* and *ideas*, as well as local events, such as in-person training for nonprofits, are promoted via the ACTion Alexandria website, email list of registered users, and promoted on Facebook and Twitter. Finally, residents and organizations can communicate in less structured ways by blogging (and commenting) on the ACTion Alexandria website, posting on the Facebook wall, mentioning the Twitter account, or talking in person at local meetings and events. The majority of these activities are managed on a day-to-day basis by the Community Manager with input from the ACTion Alexandria steering committee and other volunteers (e.g., bloggers).

Methods

We chose to perform a case study of ACTion Alexandria for several reasons: 1) case studies are ideal for understanding phenomena that occur within a larger system (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991), such as an action brokering platform; 2) a case study approach bounds the research inquiry around the system of action that community managers can influence; 3) case studies are also ideal for describing new and emerging phenomena, like action brokering, where little empirical investigation has been conducted to date (Yin, 2008); and 4) case studies support an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within an existing context, which leads to strong external validity of the findings.

ACTion Alexandria is an ideal case to examine for several reasons. First Alexandria, VA, is known as one of the most generous cities with high levels of citizen donations and a thriving non-profit community, due in part because of its proximity to the D.C. area. For example, Alexandria was ranked the second most generous city with a population greater than 100,000 people in 2011 according to Convio (<http://ir.convio.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=642099>). Second, the ACTion Alexandria platform brokers actions (e.g., donations of goods) as well as ideas (e.g., proposed solutions to known problems) allowing for a range of social practices and technical features to be examined. Third, the platform has successfully recruited over 2,000 registered users and 130 local organizations in its first year, helping raise over \$100,000 and collect thousands of donated items for local nonprofit organizations. Furthermore, ACTion Alexandria worked with the authors of this paper since before the platform's launch. This allowed us to focus on the critical first year of an action brokering platform, which is when most online communities face their greatest challenges related to increasing participation (Bishop, 2007).

Data for this project were collected as part of a multi-year evaluation of ACTion Alexandria conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Maryland and Brigham Young University. The data collection effort for the full research and evaluation of the platform includes multiple surveys of residents (before the site's launch and after it had been operational for eight months), notes from meetings held with the ACTion Alexandria steering committee, content from the ACTion Alexandria website (e.g., text from blogs, actions, and ideas), a questionnaire filled out by

five organizations who had a Featured Action, website and social media analytics data (e.g., website activities completed, website visitors, registered users, Twitter followers, etc.), transcripts of nine interviews with representatives of nonprofits and government agencies working with ACTion Alexandria, and two interviews with the Community Manager. In this chapter, we focus primarily on data from the interviews, Featured Action questionnaire, and web and social media analytics.

We used a mixed-method approach to triangulate and analyze the data. We analyzed, summarized, and visualized website and social media analytics data using Excel 2010, Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, Bitty, and Thrive (for Twitter analytics). We analyzed qualitative data (e.g., notes and transcripts from interviews, open-ended questionnaire responses, website content) using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Once the major themes were identified and analyzed, we were then able to relate them to existing theories and literature in the findings and discussion sections that follow.

Findings

This section reports on the first year of ACTion Alexandria’s role as an action brokering platform. First, we present summary data on ACTion Alexandria from web analytics tools. Next, we present major themes related to the social practices and technical features of *featured actions*, the primary mechanism used to broker direct actions through the platform. Then we present the major themes for *community challenges*, the primary mechanism used to broker *ideas* for actions. We provide evidence for the impact that the *featured actions* and *community challenges* had on the success of the platform as a whole, and discuss lessons learned along the way.

ACTion Alexandria Summary Data

From February 7, 2011, to February 29, 2012, ACTion Alexandria accumulated a total of 1,963 registered members and 130 registered nonprofit organizations or government agencies. As shown in Figure 5, there was slow but steady growth from its beginning (with nearly 200 registered users in the first week) to mid-December of 2011. This was followed by a month of rapid growth initiated by the Project Play Community Challenge (see Community Challenge section below), which ended in January of 2012, after which point growth has continued to be incremental.

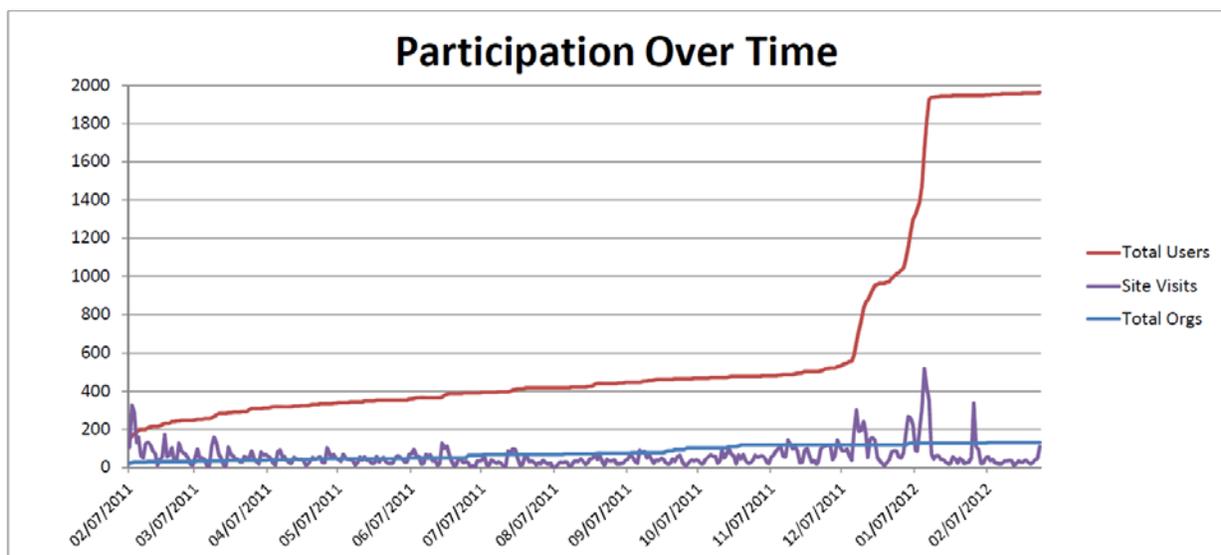


Figure 5: ACTion Alexandria registered users, organizations, and site visits over time.

As is typical of these types of voluntary contribution sites, users engage with the site to varying degrees (Preece & Shneiderman, 2009). Table 1 shows the frequency of key activities that users can perform on the ACTion Alexandria

website. The website itself has been visited over 24,000 times by more than 16,500 unique visitors¹. Many activities, such as learning about Featured Actions, reading news and blog posts, do not require logging in to the site, which explains in part why these numbers are so much higher than the registered users. The number of registered users who log in each month ranges from 3% to 34% depending on the activities brokered in a given month. The high number of unique people taking an Action (282) compared to the number of actors for the Actions Taken (374) suggests that many people take only 1 action via the website (*Median*=1 action taken). Other activities, such as Blog Posts and Ideas Posted are frequently performed by a core group of active community members.

Table 1: User ACTIVITY and number of unique ACTORS on ACTION Alexandria website (02/07/2011-02/07/2012)

	Activity (total number of actions)	Unique Actors
Website Visits	24,023	16,702
Actions Taken	374	282
Blog Posts	242	50
Blog Comments	73	64
Ideas Posted	187	36
Votes Cast	5,440	1,120

Many people interact with ACTION Alexandria via their Facebook and Twitter accounts. The Facebook page had an initial spike of fans, followed by steady monthly growth at an average of 20 new fans a month culminating in 464 fans as of February 29, 2012. According to Facebook Insights data collected since October 2011, the Facebook page averages 176 contributions by engaged users (e.g., mentions, likes, shares) and 76 discussions (i.e. people talking about ACTION Alexandria) per month.

ACTION Alexandria's Twitter account has 1,159 Followers as of February 29, 2012. It has spurred 2,222 retweets, mentions, and replies during the first year with an average of 156 per month for the period after its initial announcement. These have led to a total of 5,085 clicks on links embedded in the Tweets (according to Bit.ly), with an average of 222 per month for the period after its initial announcement. Taken together, it is clear that much of the brokering activity occurs via social media channels, though the website and email list are also essential to the platform's brokering efforts.

Featured Actions

Actions, a designated term for small acts of service such as donating goods and money or volunteering one's time, are one of the core elements brokered by the ACTION Alexandria platform. Local nonprofits or government agencies (i.e. action providers) sponsor *actions* and community residents (i.e. action seekers) complete them. *Actions* require small contributions from a large number of action seekers over a short period of time (usually one week) to meet an immediate need. *Actions* are often in the form of small monetary donations, specific items such as diapers or

¹ Unique visitors as reported by Google Analytics overstates the number of unique people, since people using different browsers or devices show up separately.

Pedialyte, or one-time service opportunities. Any organization using the ACTion Alexandria system can post *actions*, which can be searched for by topic on the website.

Actions that are facilitated and promoted by the Community Manager are referred to as *featured actions*. Featured actions are week-long campaigns that seek to meet an urgent community need identified by a local nonprofit in conjunction with the Community Manager. Often the Community Manager helps identify a corporate sponsor who matches funds or items raised by the community. Featured actions are promoted via the ACTion Alexandria homepage, email list, Facebook page, and Twitter account, as well as by the organization sponsoring the specific Featured action. Through fourteen Featured actions² promoted during the first year of the project, community members contributed \$115,680 in online donations and 3,720 items (valued at \$4,338) to City of Alexandria nonprofits, making the overall donation total \$120,018. Donated items included medicine, food, diapers (see Sidebar 1), children's books, and toys.

Sidebar 1: Community Lodgings Featured Action

An example of one featured action campaign was a diaper drive for Community Lodgings (<http://communitylodgings.org/>), a local nonprofit dedicated to helping families exit homelessness through transitional and affordable housing and through youth and adult education programs. An adequate supply of disposable diapers can cost between \$100 and \$120 a month, and safety net programs (e.g., food stamps) do not cover their cost. For a family struggling with homelessness, the cost of diapers can seem insurmountable. Community Lodgings needed disposable diapers for children living in their transitional housing apartments. The featured action sought to raise 640 diapers (one-month's supply of diapers) in one week. By the end of the week, community members had donated 2,500 diapers to Community Lodgings, exceeding the goal by 390%.

Based on the number of items collected, money raised, and services provided, there is no question that the featured actions have been successful. All but one of the featured actions promoted in the platform's first year met or exceeded their goal. In fact, featured actions through ACTion Alexandria enabled some nonprofits to accomplish more than they would have on their own. Several of the featured action nonprofits mentioned that they would not have launched a campaign like the one they launched for the featured action had it not been for ACTion Alexandria. This was particularly the case because many nonprofits did not have the technological sophistication and experience to perform online action-based initiatives (e.g., "[ACTion Alexandria] provided something that we really couldn't bring to the table"). Smaller and newer organizations benefitted especially from gaining visibility in the community. Larger organizations used the featured action to bolster a campaign that they would have run on their own, but with greater efficiency and effectiveness. Nearly all of the nonprofits mentioned that being a featured action helped them find new donors and reach their goal quicker than they would have on their own. For example, one organization mentioned that their featured action "generated more donations than a typical email list or other drive that we would have put together ourselves."

The following sections discuss some of the key themes that emerged from the implementation of the featured actions on ACTion Alexandria, as well as potential problems that were raised by this approach.

Community Manager Time and Expertise

The role of the Community Manager was critical to the success of featured actions. Because this form of crowdsourced charity through *actions* was new to organizations, it was not always clear to them how to craft a featured action that would appeal to residents (see Sidebar 2). The Community Manager was able to use her experience to help organizations scope out and frame strong campaigns in this new online context (e.g., "[The Community Manager] was extremely helpful in helping us create an action that would be well received by the public. She also helped us choose a goal that was attainable and was supportive during the length of the campaign."). In

² Spring2ACTion is an annual giving event in Alexandria run by ACT for Alexandria, the ACTion Alexandria management team. In 2011, the campaign was managed through the ACTion Alexandria website and accounts for \$104,000 in donations of the total amount listed above.

addition, resource-poor organizations benefited from the Community Manager's help in developing promotional materials, getting matching funds from corporations, which were highly valued by the organizations, and coordinating the launch of the *action*. This all made the cost of participation low for organizations, despite the "extra work" needed to coordinate with the Community Manager, which was not part of their regular workflow. It was clear from the interviews and comments that without the Community Manager's heavy involvement many of the featured actions would not have occurred and would otherwise probably not have been as successful as they were.

Sidebar 2: Properties of a Successful Featured Action

Based on an interview with the ACTion Alexandria Community Manager, a successful Featured Action should...

- last for a short duration (e.g., one week)
- focus on a single, well-defined and measurable goal (e.g., X number of diapers, Y dollar amount to go towards Z)
- allow contributors to make micro- and macro-contributions (i.e. no contribution is too small)
- clearly demonstrate how it will benefit the organization and the individuals it serves
- relate to a popular need that resonates with the public (e.g., oriented around children)
- be a joint effort between the organization sponsoring the action and the action brokering platform (i.e. ACTion Alexandria)
- have matching funds (e.g., a corporate sponsor) to increase incentive to outreach on the part of organization and to participate on the part of citizens.

Leveraging ACTion Alexandria's Social Network for Partner Organizations

ACTion Alexandria helped organizations extend their reach to a larger network of residents, which helped the organizations reach their goals quicker while also making more people aware of the organization. Organizations that were smaller or less well known for other reasons (e.g., they were new) had the most to gain from being Featured, since their existing network was limited. The following comments from two different nonprofits illustrate this point:

"We wouldn't have had the capacity to do it on our own. We don't have the network of people to put it out to...the network of people that connected to it was incredible. We would never have been able to do that. We don't have that capacity. ... Our listserv is not nearly as pervasive as the one that ACTion Alexandria has."

"The biggest impact was [the Community Manager] being able to get the word out. We just have a sense that more people are aware of us now."

Growing ACTion Alexandria's Social Network

ACTion Alexandria also extended its own network as a result of the Featured ACTION mechanism, because the sponsoring organizations helped provide a continual source of new members to the site. Nonprofit organizations promoted their own actions through whatever existing channels they had including email lists, newsletters, social media accounts, contacts at religious organizations, etc. Inevitably, this reached many people not yet part of ACTion Alexandria. Those who learned about the Action were taken to ACTion Alexandria's website where there was a detailed description of the Action and a plea to register and click "Take Action", directing the resident to an Amazon wishlist, donation button, or other appropriate link. Website analytics and registration dates make it clear that Featured Actions account for the majority of the steady, if small, growth in membership throughout the first year. Unfortunately, this model can be difficult to completely enforce, as when nonprofit organizations post a different link to their donation page or when the nature of the Action makes tracking it online difficult (e.g., delivering books in person). There is a balance that must be struck between the desire to make completion of the Action as simple as possible and the desire to extend the resident network associated with ACTion Alexandria.

Competition in the Nonprofit Sector

When pressed to identify concerns about the platform, nonprofits mentioned competition as a potential issue when interviewed before the launch. For example, some organizations expressed reservations about the idea of featured actions because they feared that it might unfairly privilege some organizations over others. Nonprofits often compete for the same scarce resources and, as a broker, ACTion Alexandria has the potential to drive attention and resources to one organization over another. An interviewee expressed concerns of “donor burnout” and wondered if all the nonprofits could get what they needed out of “a diminishing or exhausted pot [of funding and resources]”. Though several organizations mentioned concerns about this before the site was launched, they still felt like the opportunities would outweigh the risks, particularly if ACTion Alexandria was fair in the way they chose who to feature. In follow-up interviews, nonprofits indicated that competition had not arisen due to the use of featured actions, though we only interviewed organizations who had been featured, so it is possible other non-featured organizations felt otherwise. Members of the ACTion Alexandria steering committee have not seen this concern explicitly expressed by nonprofits, but noted that some organizations were hesitant to drive their constituents to the ACTion Alexandria website because of the extra work involved or due to fear of losing their own website traffic (i.e. site visits).

Sustainability of Featured Actions Moving Forward

One downside for ACTion Alexandria of using the featured action mechanism is that it draws so much attention toward the featured action that other *actions* posted on the site by organizations may go unnoticed. Also, organizations who are used to receiving assistance from the Community Manager in crafting and promoting their featured action may be less willing to create their own non-featured *actions* on the site. Indeed, several organizations did not know that *actions* and featured actions were different and hardly any organizations have posted their own non-featured actions to the site. While additional training may alleviate this issue, the prominent use of featured actions may obscure the use of regular *actions* or set up the false expectation that the Community Manager needs to be heavily involved with all *actions*. Currently, the limited time of the Community Manager creates a bottleneck that restricts the number of featured actions that can be promoted in a given month. Training organizations to develop their own successful *actions* and take on more of the responsibility of running featured actions will be essential for the future sustainability and growth of ACTion Alexandria. Additionally, providing organizations with mechanisms to target non-featured actions to registered users who have interests in their organization may help in the future.

Community Challenges

Another core activity of ACTion Alexandria is brokering *ideas* that address community-wide concerns or opportunities. The Community Manager, in conjunction with the local nonprofits and government agencies, identifies a problem or issue that could benefit from community input. The *Community Challenge*³ is posted to the website, outreach (online and offline) is conducted, and residents submit their *ideas* for solutions. Next a voting round occurs, which helps identify the best (i.e. most popular) submitted *ideas*. The Community Manager follows up and appropriate actions are taken based on the top *ideas*. Overall, the process is similar to other idea generation sites (e.g., Give a Minute, described earlier in this chapter) that have been used by some government agencies to gain citizen input and promote transparency and openness (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010, 2012). Community Challenges include examples in which residents proposed *ideas* to make Alexandria a more sustainable community, provided feedback on a new set of community quality of life indicators, and identified playgrounds that should be improved (see Sidebar 3).

Sidebar 3: Project Play Community Challenge

In discussions with local nonprofits and government agencies focused on health, obesity, and athletics, ACTion Alexandria recognized a need to increase play opportunities for children in Alexandria. The Community Manager worked with local organizations to put together a task force and launch Project Play, an initiative with the goal of ensuring that “every child in Alexandria has a quality space to play.” To aid in this effort, a Community Challenge was posted on the ACTion Alexandria website that encouraged residents to nominate a playground that would receive a

³ During the first year of the project, ACTion Alexandria used the term Community Challenges. The steering committee and materials now refers to Community Challenges more simply as “Ideas”.

\$15,000 Spruce Up grant from Project Play. A total of 22 *ideas* were submitted by residents who posted detailed descriptions of why a particular playground warranted the grant and included photos to help tell the story. The leading *ideas* received over 1,000 votes, helping identify those with wide community support.

ACTion Alexandria only brokered a few Community Challenges in its first year, but its final challenge in December 2011, the Spruce Up Grant contest for Project Play, was directly linked to the site's highest increase in registered users by far (see Figure 5, above). They tallied over 4,000 votes from 1,000 participants in under a month. All the voting was conducted through the ACTion Alexandria platform. It is too early to tell if the new members who joined in order to vote will translate into a larger number of people taking other *actions* or submitting other *ideas*, however, it is likely that at least some of this added awareness will pay off. In addition, the Community Challenges bring the total community investment in 2011 up to over \$210,000 through the addition of \$92,500⁴ in grant money that was brought to the table through collaboration fostered by Community Challenges.

Role of the Action Brokering Management Team

The successes of the Community Challenges are largely a result of the ACTion Alexandria management team's connections, insights, and efforts. Since 2004, ACT for Alexandria, the primary sponsor of ACTion Alexandria, has been promoting philanthropic activity through training and helping organize the nonprofit and government sector in Alexandria (see <http://www.actforalexandria.org/>). For example, they sponsor an annual "Spring to Action" event where they bring together nonprofit and local government organizations to network, share best practices, and teach new skills such as how to effectively use social media. Steering committee members and the Community Manager sit on many community councils, participate in town hall meetings, and interface with local government. Because of these endeavors, ACT for Alexandria, and by extension ACTion Alexandria, enjoys a great deal of social capital among the philanthropic community as evidenced by the very positive comments we heard about them from interviewees. Indeed, most interviewees did not differentiate between ACT for Alexandria and ACTion Alexandria as they discussed the merits and challenges of the platform. In the comments that follow in this section, interviewees use the abbreviated name "ACT" or "ACTion" to refer broadly to the project as a whole.

ACT for Alexandria's pre-existing position as a network hub among the Alexandria nonprofit community places its steering committee, including the ACTion Alexandria Community Manager, in an ideal position to help broker and aggregate actions among citizens and organizations. Their panoramic view of the entire community-giving network in Alexandria allows them to see problems that nonprofits share as well as opportunities for collaboration. ACTion Alexandria Community Challenges act as a platform for them to draw attention to some larger social issues in the community, while at the same time getting fresh ideas from residents who can directly contribute their feedback. The Project Play Community Challenge (see Sidebar 3) is an example where ACTion Alexandria's Community Manager helped broker a partnership between the Childhood Obesity Action Network, Get Healthy Alexandria, and Smart Beginnings Alexandria/Arlington. The goal of this partnership was to create a taskforce on playspaces in Alexandria, submit a grant together, and solicit ideas from residents on which playgrounds should be prioritized for renovation. The project helped bring together groups that were working on similar issues but were previously unaware of each other as the following quote indicates:

"An interesting outcome with ACTion [Alexandria] is that we've learned a lot about additional community collaborations that we didn't know of before, particularly with several PTAs."

A Competent Community Manager

⁴ Community Challenges added \$92,500 to the City of Alexandria's giving total through the ACTion Alexandria platform: Project Play Spruce Up Grants: \$15,000 (dispersed grant money with partners); Alexandria Green Ideas Challenge: \$2,500 (dispersed grant money); KaBOOM! STARS playground build in Old Town (\$75,000).

As with featured actions, the Community Manager is critical in framing Community Challenges in a way that will resonate with residents and generate enthusiasm and ideas (see Sidebar 4). The importance of having a competent Community Manager that nonprofits trust cannot be overstated. A large part of the success of the ACTion Alexandria project results from the foresight to hire an experienced, enthusiastic, full-time Community Manager (see Sidebar 5). Interviewees described the Community Manager as “amazing”, “delightful to work with”, “helpful and accommodating”, “knowledgeable about social media and willing to share.” The following quote describes how the Community Manager helped make one Community Challenge a success:

“I’ve been working pretty collaboratively with [the Community Manager]. We talk about it ahead of time; about the kinds of information she thinks will be useful, the kinds of information I think will be useful, the timing, and then I try to send her information and then she sort of translates it to the website.”

One concern with having a Community Manager that is so central to the successful operation of an action brokering platform is that it introduces a single point of failure. In the case of ACTion Alexandria, this has not been a problem, but if a Community Manager without the right skillset is hired, the credibility of the entire action brokering platform can be jeopardized. Additionally, relying on a single Community Manager to take on too many responsibilities may lead to burnout or a lack of scalability.

Sidebar 4: Properties of a Successful Community Challenge

ACTion Alexandria provides the technical platform necessary to facilitate voting and idea generation for Challenges, which has the direct effect of increasing new registered users. However, not all Challenges are created equal.

- Popular challenges tend to be ones where there is a “winner” associated with the ideas that are generated through a process of community voting.
- Community Challenges work well when they are sponsored by a project that spans multiple organizations and focuses on a social issue rather than a specific organization (e.g., childhood obesity, teen pregnancy, or affordable housing).
- It has to be something that affects many people in the community or be something that many people in the community care about.
- Challenges last longer on the site (one to two months) and culminate in a week-long voting period by community members.

Sidebar 5: Role of the Community Manager in Action Brokering Platforms

The Community Manager is a key component of an action brokering platform. The Community Manager:

- Works with human service and civic organizations to identify and help shape opportunities for community action (actions, ideas, etc.).
- Posts actions, ideas challenges, blog posts, Tweets, Facebook wall posts, events, and other community information.
- Identifies actions that fulfill an urgent human service need in the community and works with a nonprofit partner to run a week long featured action campaign to meet a specific goal (100 books, 640 diapers, \$500, etc.).
- Identifies community problems ripe for citizen sourced solutions and posts them as challenges to the community on our ideation platform. Conducts outreach and moderates process.
- Continually conducts community outreach through a variety of methods both online and offline.
- Manages all aspect of site and program (website administration, community organizing, email marketing, editorial content, sponsorships, organization partners, public relations and marketing, etc.).

Increasing Capacity through Social Media

Another key factor leading to the success of the Community Challenges as was the case with featured actions has been the effective use of social media. Indeed, social media is the kind of tool that several interviewees said they wished they did more of, but just did not have the time or capacity to do well. Because Community Challenges require large amounts of participation in order to be successful, strategic campaigning through social media greatly

increases the word-of-mouth communication about the challenge and drives people to the website. In this way, ACTion Alexandria fills a critical gap for its community of nonprofit and government agencies, as highlighted by the following quotes:

"If ACTion Alexandria did not exist, we would not have done the [Community Challenge].... That's something that we came up with as a way to really engage the public in. ...I just truly am not good at the social marketing stuff...and [the Community Manager] is really good at it. ...I don't have any sort of platform or forum that I would be able to host this kind of thing...I think that this is probably much more successful than whatever we would have come up with."

"I think that ACTion [Alexandria], its strength is really that it does the social media piece well and engages people over the Internet in a way that we really just don't have the capacity to do."

Raising Awareness

The benefit of a Community Challenge in particular is that it allows organizations to get input from citizens early in a project and build an audience around an issue that might not otherwise exist. Not only are Community Challenges useful for getting the word out about ACTion Alexandria and increasing its membership, but they are useful for raising awareness about social issues in the community. The following comment highlights this finding:

"The awareness piece is raised and we have at least some audience to spread information out about our play equipment and sort of the next steps. ...It will be interesting to see whether and how we can mobilize that to a greater degree. ... It's another forum for spreading information to the public."

Discussion

Action brokering platforms raise several important policy issues that merit further study. Many of these policy issues relate to the nature of action brokering platforms – whether the platforms would be most successful at engaging the community members and stakeholders as a nonprofit organization, as a government entity, some kind of hybrid, or another kind of organization. A key issue tied to this consideration is one of funding. As a government entity, funding may be steadier, but as a nonprofit, the potential for funding might be higher.

How an action brokering platform is established shapes its functions. The differing nature of platforms has important impacts on the types of activities that community members and groups feel comfortable engaging in, as well as the overall support that the community might give to the platform. For example, a nonprofit might be able to tackle issues too politically difficult for a local government agency to endorse. And, as with other local institutions, such as public libraries, different communities will have different standards. Beyond the variations due to the ways in which the platforms are established, the activities of action brokering platforms will differ from one community to the next.

Regardless of the ways in which action brokering platforms are established, they offer important new ways to connect community members, nonprofits, and government agencies. The advent of social media has increased the potential for action brokering platforms to help nonprofits and local governments achieve a meaningful role in promoting civic participation. Nonprofits and government agencies at all levels in many nations are increasing their use of social media technologies as a way to reach members of the public in new locations, extend government services, and engage members of the public in social issues (Jaeger, Paquette, & Simmons, 2010; Pirolli, Preece, & Shneiderman, 2010).

These action providers have turned to a wide-range of social media – blogs, microblogs, sharing services, text messaging, discussion forums, collaborative editing tools, virtual worlds, and social networking services – to engage action seekers (i.e. residents) with varying degrees of success (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011). Action brokering platforms that incorporate a Community

Manager and other key social practices, suggest an improved structure for organized and facilitated collective action and civic participation. The increased success of action brokering platforms that serve at the city level, like ACTion Alexandria, demonstrate that these socio-technical systems are likely to be important long-term components of interactions between governments, members of the public, and organizations broadly in the public good sphere.

Many members of the public already expect that government services will be available electronically and be accessible via social media technologies (Jaeger & Bertot, 2010). The ways in which these online efforts are designed, organized, and implemented varies widely, having significant implications for the level of effectiveness in promoting civic engagement (Jaeger, Bertot, & Shilton, in press). Action brokering platforms offer opportunities for action seekers and action providers to engage in collective action through socio-technical systems in several ways (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010):

- **Democratic participation and engagement:** using action brokering platforms (specifically through social media, a community manager, and guiding policies) to engage the public in participatory dialogue and civic action (i.e. Featured Actions), providing a space for citizen philanthropy.
- **Crowdsourcing solutions and innovations:** Seeking innovation through public knowledge and talent to develop innovative solutions to large-scale societal issues (i.e. Community Challenges).
- **Co-production:** action seekers and providers jointly develop, design, and deliver government services to improve service quality, delivery, and responsiveness (i.e. the proposed future of ACTion Alexandria).

Though not mutually exclusive, these opportunities offer great promise and pose new challenges in defining civic participation in the 21st century.

Due to the nascent nature of action brokering platforms, many of the ways in which local governments, community organizations, and community members will be able to leverage the opportunities provided by them are still being identified. As these platforms become more widely used, policy issues will need to be considered and they will need to be better integrated into nonprofit and government approaches to delivering services through the Internet. Nevertheless, based on the lessons of ACTion Alexandria, we see that they have the potential to offer benefits to all community stakeholders.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we defined a new concept called, *action brokering* and used ACTion Alexandria as a case study of an *action brokering platform*, combining multiple data sources, including web analytics, surveys, and interviews to identify emerging themes. Our primary goal was to better understand the role of action brokering as a mechanism for community participation in local social issues and to identify best practices and lessons learned for using such an approach, particularly during the early stages of project development. While our focus has been on one case (i.e. ACTion Alexandria) and the findings are not generalizable to all web-based civic engagement platforms, we believe many of our findings and recommendations should be considered by other action brokering platforms.

Some of the key takeaway messages include:

- Hire a competent Community Manager who can act as a social network hub, online and offline outreach expert, community organizer, and idea generator (see Sidebar 5).
- Leverage organizations with existing social capital (e.g., ACT for Alexandria) when launching new action brokering platforms.
- Provide initial support for nonprofits that need help in crafting compelling and reasonable campaigns for *actions* and *ideas* that work in an online environment.
- Create win-win network-building opportunities where organizations and action brokering networks both promote *actions* and *ideas* and in so doing drive their own networks toward the other in a virtuous cycle.

Starting with popular *actions* and *ideas* with well-known sponsoring organizations may be especially important in the early ramp-up stage (i.e. Year 1).

- Broker *actions* and *ideas* between different nonprofits as well as between nonprofits and residents.

These takeaways from ACTion Alexandria's first year demonstrate one successful model of action brokering. The findings may not be generalizable to other platforms, particularly those not at a local city level. Additionally, we have focused on the first year of ACTion Alexandria. Future years may reveal a new set of strategies necessary to successfully broker *actions* and *ideas* in a way that is scalable and sustainable over time. Future research will need to elucidate the changes in approach within ACTion Alexandria, as well as other models of success from different action brokering platforms. Though our current understanding of action brokering platforms is in its infancy, we hope the experience of ACTion Alexandria and the new theoretical focus on *action brokering* will help inspire additional platforms designed to meet the needs of residents and service providers alike.

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