The Promise and the Practice of Digital Participatory Planning

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Communications technologies and digital platforms now structure significant portions of citizen–planner interactions. Over the past decade, a new class of participation software has emerged as routine infrastructure for public engagement in local planning. Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms (DDEPs) are purpose-built, multifunctional online hubs, offered primarily through software-as-a-service models by for-profit vendors, that consolidate a municipality's digital engagement efforts into a single interactive environment. DDEPs power many local governments' "Have-Your-Say" websites, providing a centralized space where residents learn about municipal projects, answer surveys, pin comments on maps, and share ideas. Despite their rapid and widespread adoption, this unique class of software has received little dedicated attention in planning scholarship. The critical theoretical lenses that have enriched our understanding of participation more broadly—particularly agonistic critique and postpolitical analysis—have not been brought to bear on these digital tools.

This dissertation characterizes, explores, and critically scrutinizes the use of DDEPs in Canadian municipal planning. It is guided by a general question: what is the role of the most recent innovations in digital engagement tools in addressing, or contributing to, the identified shortcomings of participatory planning processes? The research proceeds through three journal-length manuscripts that move from empirical documentation through practitioner experience to critical theoretical analysis. The first paper defines DDEPs and documents the extent of their adoption through a nationwide scan of 839 Canadian municipalities, revealing that a majority of Canadians now reside in a jurisdiction served by a DDEP, with the market overwhelmingly consolidated around a single commercial provider. The second paper draws on semi-structured interviews with 44 professionals responsible for procuring and administering these platforms across 33 municipalities and three platform vendors. Applying a four-part platformization framework developed for this study, it reveals how a mix of rapid adoption, shallow deployment, and tightly managed online spaces risks a kind of performative handwaving of participatory process. The third paper brings a postpolitical lens to the same practitioner accounts, diagnosing how platform architecture and administrative practice together constitute depoliticization through three interconnected mechanisms: the scoping and control of dialogue, the sanitization of dissent, and the performance of openness.

Taken together, the three papers establish a cumulative argument that DDEPs function as postpolitical infrastructures—platforms whose embedded logics of order, standardization, manageability, and metrics align with and accelerate the depoliticizing tendencies that critical scholars have long identified in consensus-oriented participatory governance. The digital turn in participatory planning, as it has unfolded in Canadian municipalities, has encoded the recognized deficiencies of communicative approaches into the default architecture of digital participation. In connecting platformization theory and postpolitical critique to digital engagement scholarship in ways that existing literature has not, this dissertation identifies what I term a deliberative antipattern, through which digital participatory planning scholarship and platform adoption have replicated rather than interrogated the limitations of communicative planning. The dissertation also offers planners and engagement professionals a conceptual vocabulary for recognizing what is at stake in the routine administrative choices that configure digital participation and argues that because postpolitical conditions are produced through specific, identifiable mechanisms, they can also be contested.

Acknowledgements

As often precedes a turn down an unconventional pathway, this journey began with some well-timed words of encouragement, a chance encounter, and, once underway, a good amount of uncertainty about my choices. Not that a PhD is an unconventional pathway, but for me, at the time, it felt like it was (one senior colleague suggested a more conventional expression of mid-career, midlife crisis, like getting into motorbikes). But one day when I offhandedly mentioned that I'd seen an advertisement for an open house about graduate study programs tomorrow evening at the School of Planning at Waterloo, my wife encouraged me to go, even though tomorrow evening was my turn to do bedtime and with our kids 2, 4, and 5 years old at the time. So this was not an insignificant offer. The chance encounter was with Dr. Janice Barry, the only person I spoke with at that entire event because I didn't really need to talk with anyone else. Janice, from that first conversation and onward through the years we have now worked together, has been generous and encouraging, always insightful and a deeply committed scholar who represents the best of academia and the best supervisor I could imagine. Further along, I had the incredible good fortune that my journey also intersected with Dr. Pamela Robinson. Pamela is one of this profession's great teachers. As a committee member and, outside of this dissertation project, a collaborator, co-author, and fellow traveller and friend, she has become, for me, a great mentor. To my other committee members, Dr. Peter Johnson and Dr. Anna Drake, and Dr. John Lewis for his earlier guidance, my sincere thanks for continuing the themes of thoughtfulness and generosity. I have much gratitude for my colleagues and managers at Dillon Consulting who (minus motorcycle guy) were nothing but encouraging when I embarked on this journey and then supported me along the way and welcomed me back as I found my way to the end. Thank you as well to all the busy professionals who took the time to speak with me about their important work while I had the privilege of taking a step back from the work. All told, through every turn and wobble and worry that the path was so much longer than I thought (and through thoughts that I should have got into motorbikes instead), all of the people here, and many more met along the way, have provided incredible support, mentorship, friendship, and care and I could not and would not have made it this far without all of you or even taken that turn in the first place. But especially, thank you to my family: Mom, Dad, Mom-and-Dad-in-law, sister, brothers-in-law, for all of your support in all the many ways you do. And most of all: Meredith, there aren't enough words, even in a 190-page dissertation, to express my gratitude enough for all that you do and all that you encourage and challenge and support

me to do. And, kids, now somehow 9, 11, and 12 years old, thanks for being part of it all too and always reminding me of what is truly important.

Dedication

For Emma, Oliver, and James. I hope you take inspiration from your mom, like I try to do, and follow your heart down the unconventional paths.

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CD	Census Division
CSD	Census Subdivision
DAD	Decide, Announce, Defend
DDEP	Dedicated Digital Engagement Platform
GIS	Geographic Information System
OPT	Online Participatory Technology
REB	Research Ethics Board
RFP	Request for Proposal
SaaS	Software-as-a-Service
STS	Science, Technology, and Society

Chapter 1
Research Context and Theoretical Framework

Digitally mediated participation in democratic planning processes has grown significantly in recent years. Professionally, I have been a part of this accelerating transition for over a decade as a planner and consultant working with municipal and other sector clients, helping them to develop community engagement strategies in support of a variety of planning initiatives. As a researcher, I have been studying the nature of this digital transition and examining its implications for the planning profession and local democratic processes. This dissertation represents the culmination of that project. This work is part of an emergent, if overdue, digital turn for planning scholarship and a growing body of research attempting to trace the growth of technology-enabled participation and grapple with its implications. Running in parallel with this digital shift has been the rapid and widespread adoption at the municipal level of a new generation of software purpose-built for public engagement and participatory decision-making. Across Canada and elsewhere, many local and regional governments have embraced Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms (DDEPs). DDEPs are commercial software products that consolidate the entirety of a municipality's digital engagement efforts into a single, standardized environment. Despite their growing prominence, these platforms have received limited scholarly attention. More broadly, the emerging body of digital engagement scholarship in planning has not been thoroughly examined through the critical theoretical lenses that are central to contemporary participatory planning thought.

I undertake this research at a moment when both the practice of participation and its theoretical underpinnings are subject to significant critique. Deliberative democratic thinking and agonistic critique represent two central, often competing currents within participatory planning theory (see Section 1.3), yet many conceptualizations of the digital manifestation of democratic planning rest on only one part of that foundation. Much of what is written about technology-enabled participatory planning takes the deliberative conception of democracy as a given and builds from its corollary of communicative planning theory, with little interwoven critique of participation itself. There is a dearth of scholarship examining whether and how digital tools might replicate or exacerbate the deficiencies of deliberative participatory approaches. This risks a "hard-coding" of the recognized limitations of certain modes of democracy and research onto digital participatory governance. At a time when digitally mediated participation in planning decision-making is becoming more central and

as the internet has indelibly altered democratic societies at large, it is especially important to apply the full range of critiques available.

This is not an anti-technology project. Technology will not solve or absolve us from the tensions inherent in participatory planning, but nor should a critical orientation lead us to dismiss the potential of digital tools. Rather, I interrogate what happens when participatory planning is assembled inside standardized, commercial software environments. This is where a critical theory of technology meets planning practice: I approach DDEPs as non-neutral artifacts whose design carries politics (Winner, 1980). My research probes the ways these platforms shape what participation looks like, whose voices are heard, and how conflict and consensus are managed. Across the three papers that are the central documents of this dissertation, I characterize, explore, and critically scrutinize the use of DDEPs in Canadian municipal planning, drawing on empirical evidence from a nationwide scan of platform adoption and interviews with 44 practitioners, elected officials, consultants, and platform vendors across the country.

This opening chapter establishes the research context and presents the questions guiding the inquiry before building the theoretical framework that underpins and connects the three standalone manuscripts that comprise the heart of this dissertation. Chapter 2 details the research design and methodology. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present the three papers, each addressing a distinct research objective. Chapter 6 draws the findings together and offers concluding reflections on contributions and the broader significance of this research. It also considers directions for future research, including the implications of this work for emerging debates around artificial intelligence in participatory planning.

1.1 Research Context

In recent decades, the “deliberative turn” in democratic theory (Dryzek, 2000) and the parallel participatory turn in planning theory (Krivý & Kaminer, 2013) have been reflected in growing demands at the local level for ever more participatory planning processes. Indeed, there has long been an emphasis on community engagement in planning literature (Arnstein, 1969) as well as amongst practitioners and local decision-makers, driven in no small part by growing expectations from citizens themselves (Brownill & Inch, 2019; Fung, 2015; Legacy, 2017). Participatory planning has become thoroughly mainstreamed, and calls from planning scholars, public participation professionals, and

communities continue to grow for more "meaningful" participation and "innovative" engagement techniques.

Running alongside the ascent of deliberative democracy has been the rise of the internet and the hopes affixed to digital civic engagement technologies. For many, it was the internet that was to provide some of the tools that would actually make communicative rationality widespread and feasible on a massive scale. Characterized by two-way and highly decentralized communications abilities, the internet and its social media platforms along with other digital deliberative innovations provided an unprecedented opportunity for an enhanced public square, one where heterogeneity could find expression. Before the internet era took hold, Benhabib (1994) wrote of a guiding model of deliberative democracy as "a medium of loosely associated, multiple foci of opinion-formation and dissemination which impact each other in free and spontaneous processes of communication" (p. 35), which could easily be mistaken for a description of the internet itself. The internet's provision of low-cost and global networked communications gave hope for a new era of internet-driven democratization and a more complete delivery on the promises of deliberative democracy. In particular, the ability of social media to give voice to those commonly excluded from traditional media and typical deliberative democratic discourse meant that it was heralded, in its early days, as an emancipatory "liberation technology" (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 47).

In 2004, the same year a Harvard student named Mark Zuckerberg launched thefacebook.com, Gutmann and Thompson published *Why Deliberative Democracy?* making the case for a dynamic and responsive deliberative democracy. Gutmann and Thompson had no particular reason to dwell on the internet at the time, and it warranted only a brief acknowledgment in their book as a medium that had not yet realized its deliberative potential, characterizing most of the activity online as "not political" (2004, p. 56). Within a decade and a half, however, Curato et al. (2018) would be describing Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as "political war rooms" (p. 139). It quickly becomes obvious how illiberal forces, including those within democratic systems, have exploited social media and the power of internet communications. Digital tools and the internet have undoubtedly been a part of important democratic successes in the preceding decades, but the internet is also intertwined with many of the failures of our democratic politics. The well-established trend of democratic decline and widening democratic deficits has paralleled a perceived erosion of healthy democratic dialogue in the online space, which in its current state has been described as a "toxic hellscape" (Phillips, 2020, para. 1) and a "trash fire" (Nakamura, 2019, 00:08). Following the brief

period of even qualified hope that the internet would help save our troubled democracies, its problematic role in both authoritarian and non-authoritarian societies has become widely recognized amidst a cresting wave of "techlash" (Botsman, 2018, para. 1). With characterizations of our present surveillance capitalist dystopia (Zuboff, 2019) and the recognized corrosive impacts of bots, trolls, echo chambers, disinformation, AI-generated "slop" content, conspiracies, foreign election interference, and more, it is now commonplace to accuse social media and the erstwhile liberation technologies of the internet of critically endangering democracy itself. Meanwhile, concern grows about the threat of "algocracy" (Danaher, 2016, p. 245), with algorithm-based governance and the intrusion of synthetic content removing humans from social decision-making altogether. Over the past two decades it has become apparent that internet-enabled technologies have failed to deliver on the promises for a new era of deliberation. The normative aspirations of deliberative democracy appear even less achievable in the digital space than in the more conventional spaces where politics takes place (Curato et al., 2018).

Yet hope remains. Standing in supposed contrast to the broader internet's democratic failures is an ever-expanding ecosystem of technology-based innovations built specifically for supporting participatory democracy. Known variously as e-democracy, digital democracy, and e-participation, the digital participatory tools comprising this ecosystem are sometimes labelled "civic tech"; what Gilman (2017) defines as "technology that is explicitly leveraged to increase and deepen democratic participation" (p. 745). Civic tech can be seen as a hopeful vestige of what Linkins (2019) call the "Good Internet" (para. 4). While an increasing amount of socio-political interaction online has manifested in what Davis (2020) describes as a "post-normative" and "anti-public sphere" (p. 1), participatory civic tech has remained firmly rooted in the deliberative normative framework (Gilman & Peixoto, 2019; Paulis et al., 2026). Gilman and Peixoto (2019), synthesizing Smith's (2009) framework for evaluating democratic innovations, identify four goods that civic tech has staked its democratic claims on: broadening who participates, giving ordinary people genuine influence over decisions that affect them, promoting rational dialogue, and ensuring the rules and information of that dialogue are visible to all. These goods map almost directly onto the normative aspirations of deliberative democracy and, by extension, communicative planning theory. A strand of deliberative theory has some measured hope that purpose-built civic tech could avoid the pathologies of social media and make at least partial progress toward the promises of deliberative democracy (e.g., Gastil, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

The evolution of participative internet technologies has occurred right alongside what Healey (1992) described as the communicative turn in planning theory and practice. Communications technologies and digital platforms now structure significant portions of citizen–planner interactions. Planners and government officials host meetings on synchronous communications software (Milz et al., 2023), crowdsource public feedback on asynchronous platforms (Alizadeh et al., 2019), use visualization software to engage focus groups (Gower et al., 2023), and experiment with scaling collaborative planning on large social media sites (Lin, 2022). These digital approaches have been promoted as remedies for the deficiencies of conventional participation formats, representing what Evans-Cowley and Hollander (2010) described as "an entirely new generation of forms and practices of public participation" (p. 397). Such digitally mediated participation in planning has grown significantly, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic forced much in-person engagement into the socially distanced realm of the virtual public sphere (Einstein et al., 2022; Milz & Gervich, 2021; Robinson & Johnson, 2021).

In planning scholarship, these digital tools are often referred to as Online Participatory Technologies, or OPTs (Afzalan et al., 2017). OPTs are varied in their structure and purpose, encompassing both general-purpose social media tools used in participatory planning processes and methods specifically designed to support collaborative planning and decision-making (Afzalan & Muller, 2018). Afzalan and Muller (2018) distinguish between "participant-led" OPTs—platforms managed by communities that planners can join, such as Facebook groups or online neighbourhood forums like Nextdoor—and "planner-led" OPTs, which are technologies specifically designed for public engagement and managed by planning organizations (p. 164). The key differences between these two categories lie in whether the tool is purpose-built for participatory planning and who controls the online environment and discussion. While planners have noted numerous challenges with participant-led platforms, particularly the use of dominant social media for collaborative decision-making (Afzalan & Muller, 2014; Lin, 2022; Robinson & DeRuyter, 2016), many have embraced the advent of planner-led civic tech (Le Blanc, 2020), and there has been a significant expansion in the supply side of digital engagement software options in response (Afzalan et al., 2017).

Within this landscape, one specific category of planner-led OPT has emerged as particularly prominent. I introduce the term Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms (DDEPs) to describe purpose-built, multifunctional online hubs that consolidate multiple participatory projects (most often marketed to and deployed by municipalities) into a single interactive digital engagement environment.

Offered primarily through software-as-a-service (SaaS) models by for-profit vendors, DDEPs power many local governments' "Have-Your-Say" websites, providing a centralized space where residents learn about municipal projects, answer surveys, pin comments on maps, and share ideas. Municipal staff can deploy these platforms without web development expertise, activating different tools, from simple information pages to interactive features such as moderated forums or participatory budgeting modules, as part of what vendors describe as a "complete, unified engagement platform" (Granicus, 2023, sec. 5). In Canada, the uptake of DDEPs has been particularly rapid. As documented in the first paper of this dissertation (Chapter 3), a majority of Canadians now reside within a local or regional government jurisdiction that uses a DDEP, with the bulk of these communities relying on a single commercial software provider (Granicus), highlighting an ongoing consolidation of participatory infrastructure around a small number of commercial products. Examples of major vendors include Granicus (the developer of EngagementHQ) and Social Pinpoint, platforms deployed across Canada and by municipal governments in the United States, Australia, Europe, and beyond (Granicus, 2025; Kleinhans et al., 2022; Social Pinpoint, 2024).

This nexus of planning and technology is now recognized as a "global phenomenon deserving of more academic attention" (Boland et al., 2021, p. 2). But for me, this research originally emerged from my own professional experience with engagement platforms, primarily in local government contexts. For over a decade, I have worked as a planner and community engagement consultant, assisting municipalities across Canada to design and implement participatory processes that increasingly rely on DDEPs and related digital tools. I have observed how DDEPs have been adopted by governments of all levels across Canada (while noting similar trends in numerous other countries), increasingly housing the entirety of digital engagement efforts across multiple projects for many local governments in particular. Yet despite their rapid uptake, this unique class of software has received little dedicated attention in planning scholarship. I have heard the promises and experienced firsthand the benefits and pitfalls of the latest manifestations of deliberative planning in digital form. From that practical vantage point, I developed a growing set of questions about how to use these platforms more effectively and about their broader, often unintended impacts on participatory practice.

These practical questions, I came to find, connect to a deeper set of theoretical tensions. The proliferation of digital engagement tools, and DDEPs in particular, occurs at a moment when both the practice of participation and its theoretical underpinnings are subject to significant critique. There is much debate about the limits to the actual transformative potential of citizen participation within

planning processes (Hillier, 2003; Monno & Khakee, 2012; Purcell, 2009), drawing on longstanding challenges forwarded by agonistic and other critical theorists who question the very foundations of deliberative democratic thinking (Kohn, 2000; Mouffe, 1999; Sanders, 1997). Participatory planning has even been described as in a state of "crisis" and is "no longer considered as a transformative practice and even less as an empowering and emancipatory practice" (Monno & Khakee, 2012, p. 86). Despite these converging critiques, the emerging body of digital participatory planning scholarship has not been fully drawn into the productive debates around theories of participation for democratic planning. Much of what is written about technology-enabled participatory planning takes the deliberative conception of democracy as a given and builds from its corollary of communicative planning theory. Evaluative metrics and theoretical framing, where they exist, are most often arranged around how these tools can help achieve the deliberative democratic goals of participatory planning, with little interwoven critique of participation itself. There is very little conflict-oriented perspective on digital participatory planning, and virtually no scholarship has examined whether and how digital platforms might replicate or exacerbate the deficiencies of deliberative participatory approaches. As Brownill and Inch (2019) have argued about participatory planning more generally, the "problem of participation" will not be fully resolved by "better techniques, more deliberation, more committed professionals or the right sort of citizens" (p. 22). Nor, I argue, will technology solve or absolve us from participatory tensions.

Furthermore, the increasing reliance on commercially developed engagement platforms raises other questions. DDEPs are not simply neutral digital containers, and they represent more than the addition of a digital channel to existing engagement practices. These are commercial products that embed particular logics of standardization, quantification, efficiency, and manageability into their design. When deployed by municipalities, planners are assembling the conditions of public participation inside standardized software environments that are built, marketed, and maintained by for-profit companies. This commercialization and consolidation has received limited critical scholarly attention at a time when critical theory has substantially enriched our thinking about participatory planning more generally, representing a significant gap in our understanding of how digital tools are reshaping democratic planning practice. It is this gap that motivates the research presented in this dissertation.

1.2 Research Purpose and Questions

The overarching purpose of this research is to characterize, explore, and critically scrutinize the use of Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms in Canadian municipal planning. This purpose responds directly to the gap identified above: the growing prominence of DDEPs in participatory planning practice has outpaced the scholarly attention directed at them, and the critical theoretical lenses that have enriched our understanding of participation more broadly have not been brought to bear on these digital tools. The research is guided by a general question:

> *What is the role of the most recent innovations in digital engagement tools in addressing (or contributing to) the identified shortcomings of participatory planning processes?*

This question is deliberately open-ended, reflecting the dissertation's progression from empirical documentation through practitioner experience to critical theoretical analysis. It does not presuppose that DDEPs are either democratic remedies or democratic threats; rather, it asks what these platforms are doing within participatory planning and how we might understand their effects through the full range of theoretical resources available to us.

To work toward this primary question, the dissertation is organized around three research objectives, each corresponding to one of the three papers:

- Objective 1 is to characterize the current digital engagement environment for municipal planning in Canada through an exploration of DDEPs: what they are, what they promise, how and where they are being used, and what makes them unique. This objective responds to the absence of any systematic documentation of DDEP adoption at a national level and the lack of a clear definition of this platform type in planning scholarship. It asks: *What are DDEPs, what do they promise, how and where are they being used, and what distinguishes them from other digital participatory tools?* The findings are presented in Chapter 3.
- Objective 2 is to examine the experiences, practicalities, impacts, and outcomes of expanded digital citizen participation through the use of DDEPs in real-world planning processes in Canadian municipalities, evaluating the implications for participatory planning theory and practice. This objective centres the perspectives of those who procure, deploy, manage, and assess these platforms in practice. It asks: *What has been the experience of*

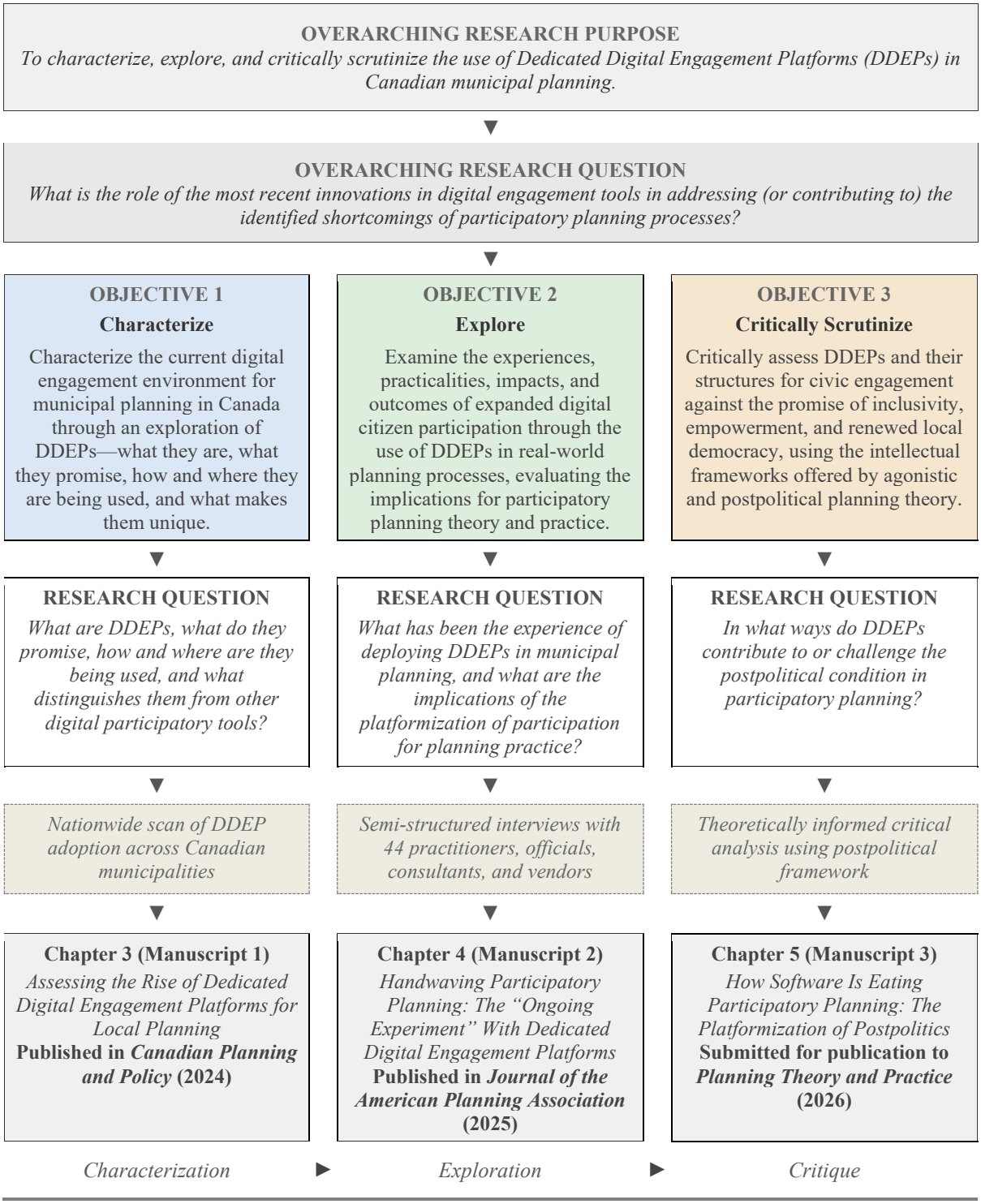
deploying DDEPs in municipal planning, and what are the implications of the platformization of participation for planning practice? The findings are presented in Chapter 4.

- Objective 3 is to critically assess these tools and structures for increasing civic engagement against their promise of inclusivity, empowerment, and renewed local democracy, using the intellectual frameworks offered by postpolitical planning theory. This objective brings the critical theoretical lenses largely absent from digital participatory planning scholarship directly to bear on the empirical evidence gathered through the first two phases of research. It asks: *In what ways do DDEPs contribute to or challenge the postpolitical condition in participatory planning?* The findings are presented in Chapter 5.

Figure 1.1 illustrates how these components of this research project fit together.

Figure 1.1

Research Objectives, Questions, and Corresponding Papers

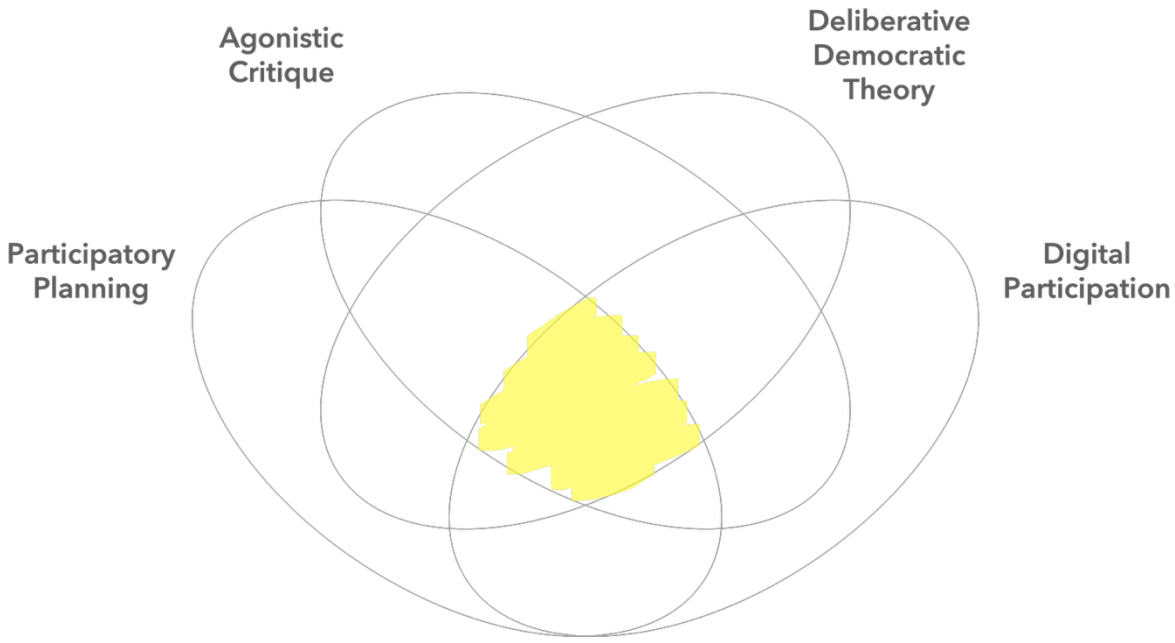


1.3 Theoretical Foundations

This dissertation sits at the intersection of four bodies of scholarly work: deliberative democratic theory, participatory planning theory, agonistic critique, and digital participation scholarship. Each has its own debates, momentum, and internal logic. Each also has established points of contact with at least one of the others. The work in this dissertation sits where all four overlap (illustrated in Figure 1.2), bringing the foundational debates of democratic and planning theory into the critical analysis of digital participatory infrastructure. This section draws on each of these four bodies in turn, building toward the theoretical architecture the three papers are assembled upon.

Figure 1.2

The Interaction of Relevant Literature Sub-Fields with this Dissertation's Contribution Space Highlighted in Yellow



1.3.1 Deliberative Democratic Theory

Democracy is not a static nor a singular concept. It can be stretched along a spectrum of variations and its many registers can be found across and within different periods of history, societies, scales, and moments in political communication. Conflict and consensus represent the two orientations along this spectrum upon which participatory planning theory is principally assembled. This section outlines how consensus-oriented deliberative democratic theory came to dominate that range.

Deliberative democracy, which emerged as a response to the inadequacies of elitist and aggregative modes of democracy, is defined by Bohman (1998) as "any one of a family of views according to which the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision-making and self-government" (p. 401). Unlike aggregative democracy, which takes the expressed preferences of citizens to determine which policies should be enacted, and which can devolve into a "deadly numbers game" in deeply divided societies (Dryzek, 2005, p. 233), deliberative democracy derives democratic justification of decisions via generally accessible and mutually understandable reason-giving. Where aggregative democracy treats democratic legitimacy as a function of preference-counting, deliberative democracy is, as Chambers (2003) puts it, fundamentally "talk-centric" rather than "vote-centric" (p. 308). In an expansion of representative democracy, rather than as an alternative to it, deliberative democracy locates democratic authority in the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precede any vote (Chambers, 2003, p. 308).

The foundational accounts of deliberative democracy often build from the work of Habermas (1984) and his theory of communicative action, which seeks to construct a collective form of rationality by highlighting "the rational potential intrinsic in everyday communicative practices" (Habermas, 1992, p. 442). The procedure hinges upon the "forceless force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1999, p. 450), engendering social coordination via a process of consensus. That deliberative process of consensus-seeking, according to Benhabib (1994), generates democratic legitimacy and creates a "degree of practical rationality" by putting a diversity of information and viewpoints on the table, moving participants toward critical reflection on previously held views and opinions (p. 32). Forcing deliberators to articulate "good reasons in public" requires expressing reasoning in a more expansive way to consider the standpoint of all involved (Benhabib, 1994, p. 32). These prerequisites can be summarized as the "regulative ideal" of what Habermas refers to as the "ideal speech situation" (Kohn, 2000, p. 409).

While decisions emanating from such consensus processes are understood to be binding on all citizens, the process is still dynamic and decisions are contingent and open to challenge in the future, a provisionality that "checks the excesses of conventional democracy's finality" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 19). And while deliberative theory is often grounded in the work of Habermas and his focus on this procedure of communicative action, deliberative theory also variously incorporates substantive conceptions of democracy influenced by John Rawls. Where Habermas

emphasizes the procedural conditions of communicative rationality, Rawls contributes the principle that legitimate political power must be exercised in accordance with a constitution whose essentials all free and equal citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse (Rawls, 1993, p. 137). For Gutmann and Thompson (2004), a "convergence between Habermas and Rawls suggests that the most compelling theories of deliberative democracy combine both substantive and procedural principles" (p. 26). This combination renders the framework both normatively appealing and practically adoptable. Bohman (1998) describes the shift from first-phase ideal theory to practical concerns about feasibility and empirical discussions of actual application as a "coming of age" (p. 423) for deliberation as a theory of democracy, which enabled it to move from the seminar room into the institutions and processes of governance, including the theory and practice of participatory planning.

Various evolutions of these deliberative conceptions have become "the predominant framework in normative democratic theory" (Talisse, 2017, p. 108). This ascendancy, what Dryzek (2000) refers to as the "deliberative turn," is considered by some as reaching hegemonic status in theoretical and practical conceptualizations of democracy (Curato et al., 2018, p. v). It is recognized that there will be barriers to what Hicks (2002) describes as the three "promises" of inclusion, equity, and reason that underwrite all deliberative theories of democracy and from which it derives its legitimacy (p. 224). However, these barriers are often seen as practical and surmountable by better processes and more adequate deliberative tools.

Deliberative theory has continued its evolutions. From within the field, the systemic turn led to a consideration of deliberation occurring across the wider public sphere and treated activism and dissent as legitimate democratic contributions rather than failures of consensus (Mansbridge et al., 2012). And a substantial body of work has since moved power from the margins to the centre of deliberative analysis (Curato et al., 2018). In these more recent accounts of deliberative theory, consensus is recognized as not reliably attainable nor the proper aim of democratic deliberation in and of itself (Drake, 2021, p. 19). This reappraisal unsettles the consensus orientation that dominated earlier conceptions of deliberative democracy. In planning scholarship, meanwhile, many theories of participation drew on deliberative democracy at the height of its consensus orientation.

1.3.2 Participatory Planning Theory

There are numerable traceable parallels between the evolution of democratic theory and developments in planning theory (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). Communicative planning, rooted in deliberative democratic theory, has gained and maintained a central position in planning theory and, perhaps even more so, in planning practice. Paralleling deliberative democratic theory through the 1990s, significant planning theory effort was dedicated to transmuting the concepts of Habermas into an approach to planning based on communicative rationality (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998). Deliberative democratic ideas provided the foundational conceptions of this critical planning theory that itself emerged from transformative critiques of the entire project of planning and the previously dominant rational-comprehensive model. The critique that gave birth to communicative planning theory came from a few angles: growing disaffection with planning outcomes, the charge that capitalistic power was subverting the progressive ideal of planning, and the postmodern critique of rationality (Forester, 1989; Healey, 1992; Innes, 1996). Communicative theorists agreed with the postmodernists' belief in the importance of difference, but they still sought a way to produce a unifying rationality. Healey (1992), for instance, deals forthrightly with questions of power and capitalistic force as a perverting or dominatory influence in the techno-rationalist approach to planning. She advocates a return to rationality, but a communicative one, as a way through an impasse: accept the many ways of knowing from the postmodernists, but still pursue rationality, although one that is emancipatory and based on situated times, places, and knowledges. Similarly, Innes (1996) presents consensus building as a solution to Altshuler's (mid-1960s) critiques of comprehensive planning, attempting to renovate the practice via "carefully" or "properly" designed consensus processes that will result in democratically legitimate outcomes. And there are social justice benefits of participation, including encouraging traditionally excluded groups to voice their perspective and the capacity-building of deliberative skills that participants gain (Aylett, 2010).

The basic proposition, highly simplified, is that through collaborative and consensus-based processes that incorporate different voices as well as emancipatory knowledge, we can come up with planning solutions that challenge the status quo and best represent the public interest. In this way, early communicative planning, built upon ideal-type deliberative democratic principles, became a route to rehabilitating the theory and practice of planning, as well as rescuing some kind of guiding rationalism, although one that was produced intersubjectively (Lane, 2005). What Healey (1992) characterized as the communicative turn in planning theory has gone on to inspire significant change

in planning practice (J. Carr, 2012). The enormous influence of this theory is reflected in the many guides and handbooks for the practicing planner and public engagement specialist, heavily flavoured with communicative action, that have, and continue, to be produced (e.g., de la Peña et al., 2017; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Susskind et al., 1999; Wates, 2000; White et al., 2022; P. A. Wilson, 2019). Indeed, even before the close of the 1990s, Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998) claimed that communicative or collaborative planning had "forged a new hegemony in planning theory" (p. 1975). Allmendinger and Haughton (2012) would later identify communicative planning as the planning mainstream and the default setting for how participation is theorized and practiced.

From the 1990s onward, this dominant view of participation was institutionalized, professionalized, and absorbed into the routine operations of urban governance (Monno & Khakee, 2012). Planners trained in communicative principles, professional resources framed deliberative ideals, and a rapidly expanding public engagement industry (Lee, 2015) crystallized those norms into a sort of professional common sense about what participation is, what it is for, and how it should be conducted. The proliferation of "good practice" participatory techniques, such as large-scale town halls, stakeholder workshops, and online consultations, produced "fashionable" methods perceived by political elites as politically palatable forms of community engagement (Legacy, 2017, p. 427). As a consequence of this institutionalization, Legacy (2017) observes, participation became part of the default routines of government, utilized to create the perception of inclusive process, but not necessarily a genuine transformation of who shapes decisions and how. The commercial pressures and client imperatives governing a growing market of public engagement professionals acted to further reinforce these tendencies. As Bherer (2021) documents, public engagement practitioners are constantly navigating the tension between satisfying sponsor demands and genuinely empowering participants. This commercialization of participatory process further spreads a stated fidelity to communicative norms, but one that can be hollowed out by the burden of balancing sponsor demands with democratic values. While there are democratic virtues associated with the work of public participation professionals, Bherer et al. (Bherer et al., 2017, p. 8) note that "manipulation and instrumentalization can also be part of the equation."

These concerns became part of a catalogue of critiques that have pushed on communicative planning theory and practice. As with the analogous rise to prominence of deliberative democracy theory, numerous challenges to communicative planning as the default setting emerged directly alongside its ascendance, including challenges to its treatment of power, doubts about its practical and

empirical claims, and critiques of the exclusionary dynamics its proceduralism can reproduce. For instance, critics charge that communicative planning, taking cues from proceduralist deliberative democracy, privileges process over actual planning or justice outcomes. A focus on participatory process, requiring everyone to "act democratically," can be used to shut down debate about the outcome (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998, p. 1984). If a group dislikes the outcome, the planner or government agency can point to a "good process" as a kind of blanket justification for whatever decision is made (Lederman, 2019).

Another line of critique cites a lack of evidence for communicative planning achieving its transformative aims. While communicative planning represents an attempt to bring in many ways of knowing, planning scholars critical of the approach have asserted that it does not realistically address how those intersubjective understandings of the world compete with one another and which understandings win the day and why (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002). There is a charge that there is insufficient empirical evidence to back up the claims that communicative process can result in more just outcomes. Too often, the assumption is made that participatory processes will, by their very nature, lead to redistributive and social justice outcomes, which is not necessarily the case (Koch, 2013; Silver et al., 2010). Relatedly, critics have argued that collaborative processes haven't met expectations or promises for better planning and more equity in planning. This is due in part to its impracticality in practice, failing to "incorporate adequately the peculiar political and professional nuances that exist in planning practice" (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998, p. 1975). The frustrations of unmet expectations further undermine the communicative process (Huxley, 2000).

A procedural-participatory approach is also said to favour the elite. As Sanders (1997) argued in her early critique of deliberation, such procedures demand a certain kind of cautious and orderly democratic discourse: "reasonable, foresighted, steady, and oriented to a common, not sectarian, problem" (p. 356). Young (2002) similarly warned that a restrictive conception of reasonableness and civility in deliberative democracy could exclude some opinions and modes of expression. Or as Kohn (2000) pointedly asserts: "Under the guise of equality and impartiality, deliberative democracy privileges the communicative strategies of elites" (p. 426). In this way, elite capture of deliberative processes and the further marginalization of some community members can amplify inequality (Koch, 2013; Taylor, 2007). Further, communicative and collaborative planning also perpetuate inequality when used as a cover for further retrenchment of the welfare state (Purcell, 2009).

All of which is related to charges of the utopian and naïve nature of communicative planning and its Habermasian foundations, rooted as they are in an "insufficient conception of power" (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002, p. 46). These critiques share a focus on the role of power in participatory processes. As Purcell (2009) argues, communicative planning "acknowledges the range of existing power differences, and it seeks actively to neutralize them for the purposes of deliberation" (p. 151), but it can neither solve extant democratic deficiencies, nor erase the dominatory impacts of power. There is a concurrent and paradoxical empowerment and disempowerment of citizens during participation processes, wherein citizens are given a "voice," but their involvement only serves to legitimate the process and the outcome—an outcome which may only reflect existing power asymmetries. As Koch (2013) argues, public participation does not reverse existing power asymmetries because the systemic sources of power remain unaltered. What is needed, critics argue, is a profound transformation of power relations, not an unrealistically hoped-for neutralization of them (Purcell, 2009).

1.3.3 Agonistic Critique

Built from these critical positions, the agonistic read of democracy holds that deliberative theory has not taken sufficient account of power dynamics, structural inequities, and how politics plays out in the real world. These inescapable realities render the Habermasian "ideal speech situation"—a condition Friedmann (1987, p. 267) equates to a graduate university seminar—impossible in actuality. Moreover, when any so-called consensus is reached in politics, it must be recognized as "a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power and that always entails some form of exclusion" (Mouffe, 1999, p. 756). Mouffe, an agonistic political theorist who has strongly influenced planning theory (Yamamoto, 2017), argued that conflict in society is not only ineradicable, but is constitutive of democracy itself. Mouffe (2009) defines "the political" as "the dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations, a dimension that can never be eradicated," in contrast to "politics," which she defines as "the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting because they are affected by the dimension of 'the political'" (p. 550). If we attempt through rationalist procedure—what Mouffe refers to as "politics"—to limit or eliminate conflict, we minimize difference and relations of power that are constitutive of democracy. By contrast, an agonistic democracy, as Lowndes and Paxton (2018) put it, "reflects a deep pluralism, whereby diverse actors express perspectives that need to be recognised

rather than reconciled" (p. 705). Rather than striving to neutralize power in the pursuit of rational consensus, democratic politics should channel inherent social conflict into productive contestation between adversaries, stopping short of destructive antagonism between enemies, but keeping the terrain of disagreement open. For agonists, the goal is not to eliminate conflict but to transform it, bringing power relations and exclusions "to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 34).

Taken together, this catalogue of critiques often coalesces into the diagnosis of a postpolitical condition. In trying to strip away conflict, communicative planning perpetuates a kind of legitimacy laundering. Governance processes can be co-opted by prevailing power interests, the status quo, the politically savvy, and the forces of neoliberalization, given the veneer of democratic justification and stamped with "good process" inclusion. As Aylett (2010) demonstrates, such processes can create the appearance of empowerment while quietly clearing the path for predetermined outcomes. Swyngedouw (2018) defines this condition of depoliticization as "a process by which consensual governance of contentious public affairs through the mobilization of techno-managerial dispositives sutures or colonizes the space of the political" (p. xv). The power of the critique, supported by empirical research, led Monno and Khakee (2012) to speculate on whether a "crisis of participatory planning" was emerging (p. 86).

The postpolitical condition is more than a description of bad process. Rather, it calls out a structural feature of governance under neoliberalism: the systematic displacement of genuine political antagonism by techno-managerial consensus-making. Swyngedouw (2009) describes this as forms of governmentality that have "replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountancy metrics and technocratic environmental management" (p. 604). In participatory planning contexts, this manifests through what Allmendinger and Haughton (2012) characterize as "carefully stage-managed processes with subtly but clearly defined parameters of what is open for debate" (p. 90). They go on to describe consensus-based approaches that "may not be resolving difficult issues so much as masking them and displacing them to other arenas" (p. 100).

Planning scholars have applied this diagnostic lens to trace these mechanisms in specific case studies. Inch (2012) shows how England's planning reform discourse turns political questions about growth into technocratic fixes to contain conflict over housing, narrowing debate to technical

questions while foreclosing debate about whether development should occur at all. Lederman's (2019) analysis of a master planning process in Flint, Michigan, reveals how a carefully constrained participatory process served to naturalize technocratic, market-based solutions and existing inequities while providing political cover to elected officials. Ruming (2018) describes how Australian state actors in an urban regeneration project responded to opposition not by engaging with it but by rescaling participation to broaden the consultation frame, diluting localized resistance and reimposing agreement. Carr and Hesse (2020) examine Toronto's Quayside project, where Alphabet Inc.'s subsidiary, Sidewalk Labs, entered the field of urban planning and development, presenting the smart city as neutral technology while assuming planning functions normally reserved for municipal institutions. Their postpolitical reading explores how the project was advanced through opaque coordination between the corporation and all three levels of Canadian government, while "glossy" participatory exercises functioned as curated information delivery rather than spaces for genuine debate or contestation. Cases like these offer empirical analyses of how the political is displaced, alternatives foreclosed, and consensus manufactured.

Critically, the postpolitical condition is not a singular event or act of suppression; as Ruming (2018) argues, it is "an ongoing one involving efforts by certain urban actors to secure a future that aligns with their interests" (p. 182). And although agonistic critics contest this movement toward depoliticization, they assert that "the political" can never finally be eradicated—there will always be a "return of the political" (Mouffe, 2005). The danger is that in the absence of a productive outlet, this return takes the form of destructive political antagonism rather than "fruitful agonistic contestation" (Metzger, 2017, p. 188).

These agonistic theorists and postpolitical diagnoses have had an important influence on a number of planning scholars (e.g., Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Gunder, 2003; Hillier, 2003; Pløger, 2004; Purcell, 2009), and by the mid-aughts, agonism was emerging as a significant current in planning theory. The result: "Habermasian communicative rationality and Mouffean agonistic pluralism come to the fore as two competing positions, creating a sharp communicative-agonistic divide" (Özdemir, 2019, p. 240). The characterization of that divide has itself been questioned, with various bridging attempts recognizing that the lens of conflict and the lens of consensus each have their blind spots, but also their contributions to understanding. There are calls for and attempts at more empirically informed nuance, cautions against the limits of broad-brush or universalizing tendencies in both consensus and conflict-informed planning theory, and warnings about the creation

of false dichotomies (Aylett, 2010; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Bond, 2011; Legacy, 2017; Silver et al., 2010; Van Wymeersch et al., 2019). Still, deliberative and agonistic conceptions of democracy, and the debates between them, remain dominant markers on the spectrum of current democratic theory and foundational conceptual pillars of participatory planning thought. Despite their centrality to broader participatory planning theory, very few scholarly works focused on *digital* participatory planning make any mention of agonism or postpolitics, with little acknowledgment of the communicative-agonistic debates.

1.3.4 Digital Participatory Planning Scholarship

Planning scholars have been examining the digitalization of public participation for nearly two decades, producing a growing body of research tracing its development and implications (Afzalan & Muller, 2018; Åström & Grönlund, 2012; Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Robinson & DeRuyter, 2016; A. Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022a). Evans-Cowley and Hollander (2010) offer an early and influential articulation of how digital tools fit into communicative planning's aspirations. Where traditional formats had failed to deliver ideal-type deliberation, new technologies offered a remedy; their framing of a "new generation" of participatory practice (p. 397) set the template for much of the literature that followed. Many of the digital participatory planning articles produced in the two decades since similarly focus on how digital democracy is done: the more transformative claims of digital technologies are tempered (Levenda et al., 2020), practical challenges are outlined (Robinson & DeRuyter, 2016), online participatory tools and their capabilities are catalogued (Afzalan et al., 2017), functionality is probed (Hjerpe et al., 2018), and effectiveness in achieving participation goals is evaluated (Afzalan & Muller, 2018). Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones's (2022a) book-length treatment of digital participatory planning represents a maturation of this literature, integrating digital tools into broader questions of citizen engagement, democracy, and design.

Outside of planning scholarship, the advent of these digital civic engagement technologies has been welcomed by many participative planning practitioners (Afzalan & Muller, 2018) while the supply side of digital engagement software options has increased substantially (Afzalan et al., 2017; Le Blanc, 2020). Scholars have identified a broader "digital turn" (Boland et al., 2021; Charlton et al., 2023) occurring across planning practice, with surveys of practitioners revealing that a variety of digital tools have become embedded in everyday professional work (Potts & Webb, 2023). Through a

systematic global review, Falco and Kleinhans (2018) identified 113 active digital participatory platforms. In the United States, Cho et al. (2021) found through a nationally representative survey that about 19% of local governments had adopted online participatory platforms distinct from social media, with adoption associated with existing civic engagement goals and city size rather than a general orientation toward innovation. Planners and government officials now commonly host meetings on synchronous communications software (Milz et al., 2023), crowdsource feedback on asynchronous platforms (Alizadeh et al., 2019), and experiment with scaling collaborative planning on social media (Lin, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the digitalization of participatory planning (A. Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022b), as exercises traditionally conducted in person were forced online (Milz & Gervich, 2021; Robinson & Johnson, 2021).

Despite the growing body of digital participatory planning scholarship and the widening integration of digital tools into planning practice, Potts (2020) has argued that planning theory more generally has mostly ignored the role and impact of information and communications technologies. Calls persist for more empirical examination of digital participatory tools in context and for deeper integration of these studies with planning theory (Cho et al., 2021; A. Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022a). Furthermore, much of the existing digital participation scholarship in planning is focused on functionality and practical implementation with evaluative metrics and theoretical framing arranged around how these tools can help achieve the deliberative democratic goals of participatory planning. Many digital participatory planning researchers take the deliberative conception of democracy as a given and build from its corollary of communicative planning theory. There is little interwoven critique of participation itself, and a dearth of scholarship examining whether and how digital tools might replicate or exacerbate the deficiencies of deliberative participatory approaches.

Across the body of digital participatory planning scholarship, communicative planning theory operates as the assumed normative baseline: Afzalan et al. (2017) state explicitly that participatory planning theories informed by communicative rationality should guide the selection of digital tools; Hjerpe et al. (2018) probe platform functionality against deliberative benchmarks; Hofmann et al. (2019) assess effectiveness within communicative planning assumptions; and Gower et al. (2023) offer communicative planning theory directly as the evaluative lens for digital engagement tools. This is what, in Paper 1, I describe as a “deliberative antipattern”: the risk that digital engagement research and practice replicates and accelerates the recognized limitations of communicative planning by focusing on institutional and cultural barriers to participation and searching for the right tools and

techniques to overcome them while treating deliberative-oriented participation as its unquestioned endpoint. The charge that such participation "systematically depoliticizes the participatory process by suppressing conflicts and agonistic resistance" (Monno & Khakee, 2012, p. 86) has generated little sustained response in digital participation scholarship.

As Gualini (2015) points out, there are two key dilemmas facing the participatory-deliberative model of democracy: its practical challenges, "on which a wealth of applied and often barely critical literature has developed," and its deeper theoretical-political tensions (p. 9). Digital participation scholarship has engaged primarily with the former. Goodspeed (2016) hints at what is missing, recognizing that communicative planning theory itself "remains controversial" and suggesting that "it seems appropriate to consider what other broad theoretical approaches could be taken to specify how digital technologies might be incorporated into planning theory" (p. 579). He draws in helpful frameworks from science, technology, and society (STS), but ultimately his analysis too remains anchored in collaborative planning theory. The agonistic body of critique has largely not been carried into the digital domain, with digital participatory planning literature often uncritically defaulting to the communicative paradigm. This gap in digital participation scholarship extends to even the most current scholarship. A 2026 edited volume dedicated to digital platforms and deliberative democracy does not engage with agonistic theory or postpolitical critique, evaluating platforms entirely against deliberative benchmarks of inclusion, quality, and legitimacy (Paulis et al., 2026). But as Kohn (2000) warned, "placing deliberation at the center of political theory has certain effects which must be interrogated" (p. 426). Much of digital participatory planning theory has not yet systematically interrogated those effects.

A more critical strand within wider digital participation literature has begun to open up more lines of inquiry, drawing on platformization scholarship, the commercialization and professionalization of participation, and the politics of design to examine what digital tools actually do rather than simply what they promise. In this dissertation, these critical theories of technology and their growing application to planning scholarship provide the substructure upon which to assemble a bridge between the agonistic critique of dominant approaches to participatory planning and digital engagement research. What the platformization literature contributes that earlier language about digital "tools" or "technologies" did not is a recognition that platforms are constitutive rather than merely facilitative. Poell et al. (2019) define platformization as the infiltration of digital platform infrastructures and their economic logics into diverse spheres of social life. As Van Dijck (2013)

observes, platforms operate as "a mediator rather than an intermediary" (p. 29), going beyond simply transmitting social activity to actively organizing and producing it. The affordances of any platform "simultaneously allow and constrain expression" (Plantin et al., 2018, p. 298). These same mechanisms recalibrate how citizens engage with urban space and governance. Barns (2019), for instance, develops this argument in the urban context, tracing how platform logics recalibrate what participation looks like within city governance and what kinds of engagement become legible and actionable to those who administer them. DDEPs, the purpose-built participation software examined in this dissertation, are an expression of this process in planning. Often developed by for-profit software companies and offered through a software-as-a-service model, DDEPs can be seen as part of the broader commercialization of deliberative democracy (Hendriks & Carson, 2008) and an increasingly commercialized public engagement "industry" (Lee, 2015, p. 57). By encoding certain assumptions about participation, DDEPs represent the latest technological manifestation of what Moini (2017) identifies as a "growing institutional offer of participation" (p. 129) that is increasingly disconnected from any meaningful capacity to shape policy outcomes.

Applying this lens to DDEPs shifts the analytical question from whether platforms deliver on their deliberative promises to how their embedded design logics shape what participation looks like and what it can accomplish. As Hajer (2005) observes, even the physical setting of deliberation shapes "what is said, what can be said, and what can be said with influence" (p. 626). In digital spaces, platforms create that structuring, building it into their templates, tools, and defaults. Both the platformization and postpolitical literatures share a concern regarding the logics of order, manageability, and standardization built into participation infrastructure. The argument developed through this dissertation is about the alignment between the organizing logics embedded in commercial participation platforms and the depoliticizing tendencies that postpolitical scholars have identified in participatory governance. This is an exploration of how DDEPs are not neutral tools but artifacts that have politics (Winner, 1980) and how they function as postpolitical infrastructures.

This is the theory and practice intersection this dissertation occupies. The four bodies of theory reviewed in this section—deliberative democratic theory, participatory planning theory, agonistic critique, and digital participation scholarship—are not fully in conversation with each other. The communicative-agonistic debates that are foundational to participatory planning theory have not been carried into digital participation scholarship. The platformization literature, which offers the sharpest analytical vocabulary for what platforms actually do, has not been fully integrated with

planning theory debates. And the postpolitical diagnosis that names the structural condition communicative planning reproduces has not been systematically applied to the new digital infrastructures, such as DDEPs, that increasingly mediate our local planning processes. Furthermore, the scale, consolidation, and practitioner experience of DDEP adoption in Canadian municipalities remains largely undocumented in planning scholarship. The three manuscripts that follow are assembled on this theoretical architecture and empirical foundation, each addressing a different dimension of the gaps this section has mapped.

1.4 Scope and Delimitations

This dissertation examines DDEP adoption and practice at the municipal level in Canada. The geographic focus on Canada reflects the context of my own research and professional practice and the particular pace and concentration of DDEP adoption at the Canadian municipal level that Paper 1 documents. The analytical arguments developed across the three papers explore dynamics that are likely not unique to Canada, as the same platforms documented here are deployed internationally. But the empirical grounding is specifically Canadian, and the findings should not be assumed to transfer without qualification to other regulatory, political, or institutional environments. The analysis does not extend to provincial, federal, or private sector-led digital engagement processes.

The study is intentionally practitioner-focused. It captures the perspectives of those who procure, deploy, configure, and administer DDEPs. This includes planners, engagement specialists, communications professionals, elected officials, and consultants, as well as vendors representing the perspective of those who develop and market these tools. This study does not capture the perspectives of members of the public who interact with DDEPs. This boundary is both practical and theoretically motivated. Practically, a study of this scope that looks Canada-wide required drawing a line around a manageable population of participants. In addition, this boundary reflects the dissertation's theoretical interest in how postpolitical conditions are constituted through administrative practice. I felt the practitioner side of the platform relationship was a tractable and theoretically generative place to draw that line. As Koch (2013) demonstrates, participatory outcomes depend heavily on the distributive power residing in governments and their administrative staff; postpolitical conditions are constituted through the choices that configure how dialogue is scoped, how dissent is managed, and how outcomes are measured and reported. Understanding that dynamic requires a focus on the practitioners who make those choices. However, the boundaries of this research means I cannot

triangulate practitioner accounts against participant experiences. Practitioners' framings of platform strengths and weaknesses should not be read as complete descriptions of how engagement functions for participants. Participant-side experiences of digital engagement, including how platform design affects the quality of public contributions and citizen perceptions of influence, remain an important area of inquiry this dissertation does not address.

The DDEP definition used throughout—purpose-built civic technology explicitly designed to support public participation through a bundled, web-based content management system—excludes social media platforms, general website builders, and non-purpose-built tools such as Zoom. These tools are in widespread use for participation-adjacent functions in Canadian municipalities, but they do not share the participatory design logic, targeted marketing, and administrative bundling of tools that characterize DDEPs and that are central to my argument. Similarly, this dissertation does not engage in depth with quantitative platform analytics, individual project outcome assessment, or the participant data generated through platform use, all of which would require access and methodologies outside the scope of this research.

Two further boundaries warrant explicit acknowledgment. This dissertation does not address Indigenous governance contexts in depth, although DDEPs are sometimes used by Indigenous community administrations or in Indigenous community engagements. Indigenous communities in Canada have distinct political relationships with municipal and federal governments, distinct traditions of governance and decision-making, and distinct stakes in participation processes that require dedicated theoretical and methodological treatment I am not equipped to provide here. And this dissertation also does not examine non-Canadian contexts, though the same DDEP software products are deployed internationally and similar platformization dynamics are likely observable elsewhere. A wider lens on DDEP usage as well as international comparative research would be a productive extension of this work.

1.5 Dissertation Structure and Contributions

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. With the research context, theoretical foundations, and scope of the dissertation established, the remainder of this chapter maps the dissertation's structure and summarizes its contributions. Chapter 2 outlines the research design and methodology, describing the phronetic approach that orients the overall inquiry, the national municipal database developed for Paper 1, and the 44-interview dataset that grounds Papers 2 and 3. Chapters 3, 4, and 5

present the three standalone manuscripts, each preceded by a brief preamble indicating publication status, venue, and how the paper connects to the broader dissertation argument. Chapter 6 provides concluding reflections, synthesizing the theoretical and practical contributions of the three papers, acknowledging limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

The three papers are designed to build on one another. Paper 1 establishes the empirical terrain: it defines DDEPs and, through a nationwide scan of 839 Canadian municipalities, it documents the widespread and consolidated adoption of these platforms, making the prima facie case that this unique class of software, which is largely unexamined in planning scholarship, warrants critical scrutiny. Paper 2 moves from landscape to practice, drawing on interviews with 44 practitioners across Canada to examine how DDEPs are adopted, administered, and rationalized in municipal planning contexts. To structure this analysis, I developed a four-part platformization framework that captures the dimensions of adoption, administration, affordances, and assessment to provide a new analytical lens for examining how platform logics penetrate participatory planning practice. Applying this framework to the interview findings, the paper reveals how a mix of rapid adoption, shallow deployment, and tightly managed online spaces risks a kind of performative handwaving of participatory process. Paper 3 brings the theoretical architecture developed in this chapter to bear on the practitioner accounts gathered in Paper 2, applying a postpolitical lens to diagnose how platform architecture and administrative practice together constitute depoliticization. Across three interconnected mechanisms—the scoping and control of dialogue, the sanitization of dissent, and the performance of openness—it argues that DDEPs function as postpolitical infrastructures that enable a visible and administratively legible form of participation while systematically bracketing contestation.

The dissertation makes contributions across four registers. Empirically, it provides the first comprehensive national scan of DDEP adoption in Canada, documenting platform use across 839 local and regional municipalities and revealing the extent of consolidation around a small number of commercial providers. The 44-interview dataset, spanning regions across Canada and drawing on planners, engagement specialists, elected officials, consultants, and platform vendors, constitutes a uniquely broad account of practitioner experience with these platforms. Theoretically, the dissertation advances the concept of DDEPs as postpolitical infrastructures—platforms whose embedded design logics align with and accelerate the depoliticizing tendencies that postpolitical scholars have identified in participatory governance. In doing so, it connects platformization theory and

postpolitical critique to digital engagement scholarship in ways that existing literature has not and identifies what I term a "deliberative antipattern" through which digital participatory planning scholarship and platform adoption has replicated rather than interrogated the limitations of communicative planning. Methodologically, the dissertation applies a phronetic approach to digital engagement research, bridging the communicative-agonistic debates that are foundational to participatory planning theory with empirical examination of how those debates play out in the design and administration of digital participatory platforms. Practically, the dissertation offers planners and engagement professionals a conceptual vocabulary for recognizing what is at stake in the routine administrative choices that configure digital participation.

Chapter 2
Research Design and Methodology

This chapter describes the research design and methods through which the questions established in Chapter 1 were investigated. The choices made here reflect an orientation toward what this research is for and what kind of knowledge it seeks to produce. My intention has been to go beyond questioning whether DDEPs "work," measured against a particular standard of democratic adequacy. Instead, following the work of Flyvbjerg (2001), I am asking what these platforms are doing, who benefits from how they are configured, and whether the conditions they produce are desirable. These are questions of values, power, and practical judgment, and they call for a mode of inquiry suited to examining them with appropriate depth and critical purchase. This chapter begins by grounding the research in Flyvbjerg's phronetic planning research as its orienting methodology, before describing the two phases of empirical work that generated the data on which all three papers draw: a national environmental scan of DDEP adoption across Canadian municipalities and a series of 44 semi-structured interviews with practitioners across the country. It then describes the analytical process through which that data was examined, addresses the positionality considerations that shaped my approach to data collection and interpretation, and closes with an account of the research's scope and limitations.

2.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

The methodology guiding this research emerges, in part, from questions arising from my own planning work and my direct experience with DDEPs, as well as from a belief in the need to assess the promises of participatory planning, including its digital manifestations, more critically. My ontological and epistemological positions are grounded in my conviction that the question of power is unavoidable in the study of planning (Friedmann, 1998), and that critical, context-sensitive inquiry is required to examine how that power operates in practice. These commitments have drawn me to Flyvbjerg's conception of phronetic planning research as the orienting methodology for this dissertation.

Phronetic planning research takes its name from Aristotle's concept of phronesis, or the practical wisdom of how to act well in specific circumstances. It centres the analysis of values, interests, and power in specific planning contexts as a basis for praxis. Unlike social science modelled

after the natural sciences, which seeks to generate predictive theory through context-independent analysis, phronetic inquiry recognizes that human and institutional behaviour cannot be decontextualized (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Its goal is not the production of universal laws and solutions, but rather what Flyvbjerg describes as analyses "aimed at social commentary and social action," clarifying where we are going, if it is desirable, and what should be done in light of competing values, interests, and power relations (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 60). The question of what DDEPs are doing in participatory planning processes, who benefits from how they are configured, and whether those configurations are desirable is best explored through this kind of deep, contextual, value-attentive inquiry.

Flyvbjerg (2004, p. 290) summarizes the phronetic planning research agenda in four value-rational questions, which are to be asked for specific instances of planning:

- Where are we going with planning?
- Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?
- Is this development desirable?
- What, if anything, should we do about it?

These questions structure the intellectual logic of the dissertation and map directly onto its three papers. The first question—where are we going—motivates Paper 1, which defines DDEPs and documents the national landscape of their adoption in Canada, establishing the empirical terrain the dissertation then investigates. The second question—who gains and loses, and by which mechanisms of power—is the organizing concern of Paper 3, which applies a postpolitical lens to diagnose how platform architecture and administrative practice together constitute the conditions under which contestation is displaced and manageability is produced. The third question of desirability is addressed across all three papers: Paper 1 frames the stakes of DDEP proliferation; Paper 2 surfaces the practical constraints and democratic limitations that practitioners themselves navigate; and Paper 3 provides the theoretical diagnosis of why those patterns constitute a democratic problem rather than a technical one. The fourth question—what, if anything, should be done—is addressed across Papers 2 and 3, though at different levels, and is synthesized in the dissertation's concluding chapter. Paper 2 responds at the level of practice, offering recommendations to planners on platform selection, administrative capacity, and developing meaningful evaluative criteria for digital engagement. Paper

3 responds at the level of theory and institutional design, arguing that planning scholarship must draw more fully on agonistic and postpolitical frameworks in its analysis of digital participation tools, that the platformization literature offers relevant analytical resources for this work, and that postpolitical conditions are not inevitable. Because they are produced through specific, identifiable mechanisms, they can also be contested through deliberate efforts to embed agonistic principles in the design of participatory institutions. Chapter 6 draws together these threads, synthesizing the cumulative theoretical and practical contributions of the three papers, identifying directions for researchers examining digital participatory planning and for practitioners navigating decisions around the use of digital engagement platforms.

This research orientation is interpretive, critical, and value-rational. It does not proceed from a position of methodological neutrality, or a "view from nowhere" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 61). As my research questions and their framing make clear, this work begins from a concern with the unexamined political consequences of a rapidly expanding practice. My ontological and epistemological positions are grounded in a belief in the importance of critical theory and questions of power, which I find especially urgent in the context of digitally mediated participatory governance. They are also grounded in a rejection of universalizing concepts of planning or planning theory, and in an orientation toward concrete, context-specific inquiry of the kind that Flyvbjerg (2004) describes as concerned with "deliberation, judgement, and praxis in relation to power and values" (p. 302). The work is a response to the central task of phronetic planning research, defined by Flyvbjerg (2004) as "to provide concrete examples and detailed narratives of the ways in which power and values work in planning and with what consequences to whom" (p. 283).

Qualitative inquiry is the appropriate mode for pursuing these questions. Understanding how platform architecture shapes what counts as legitimate participation, how administrative routines normalize the bracketing of conflict, and how practitioners make sense of and justify the choices they make in configuring digital engagement environments requires the kind of deep, contextually attentive, meaning-focused engagement that qualitative methods provide. Flyvbjerg's (2001) work contends that "the most interesting phenomena, and those of most general import, [are to] be found in the most minute and most concrete of details" (p. 145). Phronetic planning research is concerned with producing the kind of thick, particularistic understanding that can illuminate how power and values operate in specific planning contexts. The research design described in the sections that follow is built on this foundation.

2.2 Research Methods

This dissertation employed a two-phase sequential research design. The first phase established the empirical terrain through a national environmental scan of DDEP adoption across Canadian municipalities, producing both a working definition and typology of DDEPs and the sample frame for the second phase. The second phase comprised 44 semi-structured interviews with practitioners responsible for administering these platforms across Canadian local and regional governments. Together, these two phases provided the empirical foundation for all three papers.

2.2.1 Phase 1: National Environmental Scan

The purpose of the national scan was to characterize the landscape of DDEP adoption in Canada: to establish who was using these platforms, which platforms were in use, and how widely they had penetrated local and regional government. This empirical baseline, largely absent from the existing literature at the outset of this research, was necessary both to justify the study's focus and to construct the sample frame for Phase 2. The national scope of this research is itself part of the design logic. Canadian municipalities, which operate within broadly comparable legislative frameworks while varying considerably in size, region, and political context, offer a productive setting for identifying structural patterns in how DDEP adoption and governance unfolds across diverse institutional environments. That shared regulatory context helped with analysis. Canadian local governments have been early and extensive adopters of DDEPs, with a concentrated vendor market that enables tracing common patterns across jurisdictions. This combination of shared technological infrastructure and contextual variation makes it possible to identify recurring patterns in how practitioners govern digital participation across diverse settings, and to attribute differences in practitioner accounts to governance and administrative choices rather than to differences between platforms.

The scan encompassed all local and regional municipalities in Canada with populations over 5,000, producing a total sample of 839 jurisdictions. This sample was constructed from Statistics Canada's Census Divisions (CD) and Census Subdivisions (CSD)—the geographic units used to organize and report census data—after eliminating all CDs and CSDs that did not correspond to an actual local or regional government administration boundary and were used solely for census-gathering purposes. Of the 293 CDs and 5,161 CSDs recorded by Statistics Canada (2021), focusing on those with populations over 5,000 and limiting selection to units associated with a local or regional government structure produced a sample of 149 CDs and 690 CSDs, for a total of 839 communities.

The population threshold of 5,000 was a practical boundary: reviewing all Canadian municipalities regardless of size would have been prohibitive given the thousands of smaller communities that make up the country. And while the cut-off is somewhat arbitrary, it produced a manageable and meaningful sample concentrated at the scales of government where DDEP adoption was most likely to be observable and consequential.

For every one of the 839 communities, I navigated to the official local government website and searched for any links or references to a Dedicated Digital Engagement Platform being used for public participation. Where no obvious link was visible, I conducted supplementary Google searches using terms such as “[municipality name] public engagement," “[municipality name] have your say," and “[municipality name] [platform name].” Similar search terms were used in French for municipalities in Quebec. I also utilized BuiltWith, a web technology profiling tool, to cross-check findings and identify any platform use that direct website searches may have missed. Only municipalities using a platform as an engagement hub for multiple projects (rather than as a one-off for a single initiative) were counted as DDEP users in the final tally. All records were captured in a structured database that included community characteristics drawn from the 2021 Census, such as provincial or territorial location, municipality type, total area, and population figures from both the 2016 and 2021 Censuses, alongside platform-specific data including provider, platform type, and observable characteristics of each community’s engagement hub. This database formed the basis for the descriptive analysis reported in Paper 1 and provided the queryable record from which Phase 2 sampling decisions were made. All 839 communities were profiled in this way between March 4–12, 2023, with some records subsequently updated based on new BuiltWith data through September 4, 2023.

The scan established that DDEP adoption is widespread across Canadian local and regional government. Of the 839 jurisdictions reviewed, over 30% (n=256) were using one of nine commercial DDEP providers, with a small number (n=9) using custom-built engagement hubs. The scan also helped me refine a typological definition distinguishing DDEPs from other digital participation tools, which structures the analysis across all three papers. Data also revealed a high degree of market concentration, with a single platform provider (EngagementHQ/Granicus) accounting for over 82% of documented users. This concentration was analytically valuable, enabling sampling across a largely common technological environment while capturing variation in how municipalities configured and governed that shared infrastructure. These findings are reported and analyzed in full in Paper 1.

The high degree of market concentration was also analytically valuable for the research design: sampling primarily across a common technological environment meant that variation in practitioner accounts could be attributed to differences in how municipalities configured and governed shared infrastructure, rather than to differences in the platforms themselves. For the purposes of the broader research design, the scan served a dual function: producing the first nationally comprehensive empirical account of DDEP adoption in Canada (while establishing a definition of DDEPs) and constructing the sample frame from which Phase 2 participants were drawn.

2.2.2 Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

Phase 2 drew on the interview dataset to examine DDEP governance in practice. Following Creswell's (2013) collective case study design, I examined multiple municipal cases in parallel rather than in depth, with the aim of identifying common patterns and meaningful variation across a range of contexts and institutional settings. The interview phase is the primary empirical basis for Papers 2 and 3.

From the national database of 256 DDEP-using municipalities, I applied purposeful maximal variation sampling to identify information-rich cases capable of capturing a wide range of perspectives on platform use (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014, p. 405). I initially contacted 82 potential key informants, selecting municipalities to achieve variation across geography, government structure (local versus regional), population size, and platform choice. This also included representatives from major DDEP providers operating in Canada. Vendor perspectives were included deliberately: they surface the commercial and design logics that municipalities inherit when they adopt a platform, and they offer a vantage point on the gap between what platforms are built to do and how they are deployed. This mix of administrative and vendor perspectives surfaced practical realities shaping platform governance and the design rationales embedded in platform development.

I conducted 44 semi-structured interviews between October 2023 and February 2024. Participants included municipal planners, public participation and communications professionals, engagement specialists, elected officials, and consultants across 33 different municipalities, as well as three representatives from leading DDEP vendors: EngagementHQ/Granicus, Social Pinpoint, and PlaceSpeak. Municipalities spanned all Canadian regions, though efforts to include francophone practitioners in Quebec were unsuccessful, a limitation acknowledged more fully in Section 2.5.

Table 2.1 and Table 2.2 summarize the composition of the interview sample. Table 2.1 presents the geographic distribution of participants across Canadian provinces and territories along with other community characteristics, and Table 2.2 describes the professional roles represented. Together, they illustrate the range of perspectives captured through the purposeful maximal variation sampling approach described above.

Table 2.1

Geographic Distribution of Interview Participants by Province/Territory

Province/Territory	Participants	Municipalities Represented
Ontario	18	14
Alberta	7	5
British Columbia	6	6
Saskatchewan	2	1
Nova Scotia	2	2
Prince Edward Island	2	1
Manitoba	1	1
New Brunswick	1	1
Newfoundland and Labrador	1	1
Northwest Territories	1	1
Vendor representatives (no province)	3	N/A
Total	44	33

Table 2.2

Interview Participants by Professional Role

Professional Role	*n*
Engagement Professional	17
Communications Professional	15
Planner	6
Platform Company	3
Other Municipal Staff	1
Planning Consultant for Municipality	1
Local Councillor	1
Total	44

All interviews followed a semi-structured format, guided by a consistent set of key questions and tailored to each participant's role (see Appendix A for a sample interview guide). This approach enabled thematic consistency across the dataset while preserving the flexibility to probe unique experiences and follow lines of inquiry that arose in individual conversations. The interview topics — platform configuration decisions, moderation practices, tool selection, and practitioners' assessments of digital participation quality—were chosen because they sit close to the routine administrative choices through which postpolitical dynamics are constituted, such as decisions about which tools to activate, how to frame engagement opportunities, when and how to moderate public input, and what metrics to prioritize. Interviews were conducted primarily by video conference, with some conducted by phone or in person. Conversations ranged from 25 to 107 minutes, with an average of 48 minutes, producing more than 33 hours of recorded and transcribed data.

This research was conducted in accordance with ethics clearance granted by the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB ## 45513) (see Appendix B). All participants were provided with an information letter and consent form in advance of their interview (see Appendices C and D). The consent process advised participants that their contributions would be anonymized in any publications or reports arising from the research, though it also offered them the option to be identified by name and institution. Nearly all participants granted this permission. I have nonetheless

opted to maintain anonymity throughout, attributing quoted material to participants by role and general geographic context rather than by name. This decision reflects a preference for consistency across the dataset and a degree of additional protection for participants who may have spoken candidly about their communities, organizations, colleagues, or platform vendors.

The original research proposal included a third phase involving a connective ethnographic and netnographic approach (Hine, 2007; Kozinets, 2015), comprising online participant observation, collection of archival data from DDEP platforms including citizen comments and backend engagement data, and the production of fieldnotes. This phase was not carried forward. Accessing backend data from municipal platforms raised access complications and significant ethical considerations regarding the use of public participation data not collected for research purposes. More practically, the interview phase expanded in scope and produced data of sufficient richness to sustain the postpolitical analysis developed in Paper 3. The two-phase design described here reflects that evolution.

2.3 Data Analysis

The analytical orientation of this research is interpretive rather than evaluative. Rather than measuring platform performance against the deliberative benchmarks that DDEPs themselves invoke, I was concerned with what these platforms are doing in practice. This was an analysis of how platforms shape the conditions under which participation takes place and how practitioners make sense of and justify the platform configuration choices they make. This follows Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's (2012) interpretive approach, centring practitioners' accounts of how they govern, configure, and administer digital engagement as the primary evidentiary terrain. Analysis proceeded through thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in both descriptive and interpretive manners. Descriptive coding captured explicit elements of platform governance, including administrative structures, tool and functionality deployment choices, evaluation and reporting practices, and moderation protocols. These descriptive codes organized the empirical landscape and provided the foundation on which interpretive analysis was built.

Interpretive themes emerged through a more iterative process, developed through repeated engagement with transcripts alongside memo-writing and ongoing dialogue with the theoretical literature. The interview data were organized around practitioners' accounts of platform selection, configuration decisions, moderation practices, and their own assessments of digital participation

quality. These topics were selected because they sit close to the mechanisms through which postpolitical dynamics are constituted in practice, including the mundane, largely unremarked decisions about which tools get activated, how engagement opportunities are framed and scoped, how public input is moderated, and by what standards success is assessed. Theoretical constructs from postpolitical critique, platformization scholarship, and communicative and agonistic planning theory were not imposed on the data as a coding framework at the outset; rather, they functioned as interpretive resources through which inductively identified patterns were examined and understood. This approach reflects the phronetic commitment to context-dependent, value-rational inquiry, concerned with understanding how power and values operate in specific, concrete practices rather than with generating or testing generalizable theory.

The code system evolved across the analysis for both Papers 2 and 3, refined iteratively as patterns became visible and theoretical dialogue sharpened interpretive focus. An early product of this process was the four-part platformization framework—adoption, administration, affordances, and assessment—which organized the analysis in Paper 2. These categories did not precede analysis but emerged from it, crystallizing through iterative coding and memo-writing before providing structure for subsequent rounds of interpretation. The code system developed for Paper 3 extended and reorganized this interpretive work, mapping coded segments onto three mechanisms of postpolitical dynamics: the scoping and control of dialogue, the sanitization of dissent, and the performance of openness. These mechanisms were recognized as empirical regularities that postpolitical scholarship helped name and interpret. They were not imposed as categories at the outset but surfaced inductively before being examined through the theoretical literature. The full code system is included as Appendix E. Memo-writing throughout helped track interpretive development across rounds of coding, flagging emerging patterns and theoretical frameworks, which helped build toward the arguments developed in each paper.

A key analytical commitment running through this work is attention to the ordinary. Postpolitical scholarship suggests that depoliticization operates not through conscious or malicious exclusion but through practices that have the appearance of good governance (Legacy, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2009). The analysis therefore attends closely to what practitioners treat as routine, professional, and consistent with best practice, examining how normative and mundane administrative choices may bracket contestation while sustaining the appearance of openness. This means the analysis cannot take practitioners' framings of their own choices as neutral descriptions. It

must treat the mundane and the routine as analytically significant, asking what normative work is being done by decisions that present themselves as merely practical. Practitioner accounts are treated throughout as evidence of how postpolitical participation is constituted in practice.

2.4 Positionality Statement

For over a decade, I have worked as a planner and community engagement consultant, assisting municipalities in Canada to design and implement participatory processes. That work has, increasingly, involved advising on the selection and configuration of DDEPs and related digital tools. I was among the first practitioners to help local municipalities in Canada adopt and implement the EngagementHQ, Social Pinpoint, and PlaceSpeak platforms, for instance (as well as a now-defunct precursor called MindMixer). The practical questions explored in this dissertation emerged directly from that professional experience. My professional experience also provided me with interpretive and practical access and industry understanding that supported this research. My familiarity with engagement workflows, their administration, and the practical vocabulary of platform use facilitated rapport with participants and enabled follow-up questions calibrated to organizational realities. That rapport enabled participants to speak freely, often in technical shorthand, and encouraged a candidness about administrative pressures, institutional constraints, practical engagement challenges, and platform limitations in an easy practitioner-to-practitioner conversation.

That proximity carries its own obligations. The postpolitical analysis required deeper probing of digital engagement practices that interviewees describe as reasonable, common sense, or professional approaches that are consistent with best practice. It required looking past practitioners' administrative rationales as neutral or inevitable and to critically examine familiar practices that I have sympathy for and have practiced myself in my own work. This required active reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis to examine how postpolitical logics are internalized and reproduced. This was done through memo-writing and iterative engagement with the theoretical literature, and an ongoing attention to what interviewees described as normal and what postpolitical critique renders as significant. The entire exercise also provided me with a valuable opportunity to reflect on my own practice.

Phronetic planning research proceeds from the recognition that there is no neutral ground or "view from nowhere" from which its value-rational questions can be posed (Flyvbjerg, 2004, p. 290). A decade of working within the administrative cultures and participatory processes this dissertation

examines helped generate the research questions, produced the interpretive access, and gave me an initial attunement to the gap between what platforms promise and what practitioners experience. The analytical disposition brought to this research grew from that professional experience.

2.5 Study Limitations

This section addresses the practical constraints on the claims I can make through this research, including limitations that arose from how the study was designed and how it evolved. First, the geographic scope of this research is limited to Canadian municipalities. The empirical grounding is specifically Canadian, and the findings should not be assumed to transfer without qualification to other regulatory, political, or institutional environments. International comparative research would be a productive extension of this work.

This study does not capture the perspectives of members of the public who interact with DDEPs. The boundaries of this research mean I cannot triangulate practitioner accounts against participant experiences. Practitioners' framings of platform strengths and weaknesses should not be read as complete descriptions of how engagement actually functions for participants. Research examining the public-side experience of DDEP-mediated engagement remains an essential and underexplored dimension of this field.

Purposeful and snowball sampling mean that the interview data is representative only of those who agreed to participate and could be reached through the networks available to me. This study does not claim to have captured a representative cross-section of all municipal engagement practice in Canada. Undoubtedly there are myriad other experiences and perspectives on DDEPs that were not captured here, including from municipalities with more critical or resistant orientations toward digital platforms and from practitioners who declined to participate. The maximal variation strategy described in Section 2.2 was designed to maximize the range of perspectives within this constraint, but it cannot resolve it.

A significant gap in the interview data concerns Quebec and francophone municipal contexts. Despite recruitment efforts, no French-language practitioners participated in the study. Quebec municipalities are included in the Phase 1 national database, and Paper 1 identifies a distinct set of Quebec-specific platforms (Cocoriko, V+, and Pando) that represent meaningful variation in both platform type and likely administrative culture. The practitioner perspectives developed in Papers 2 and 3 are therefore drawn exclusively from English-language municipal contexts. The Quebec DDEP

landscape, including its distinct regulatory environment, linguistic specificity, and different platform ecology, remains outside the interpretive reach of this research. This is acknowledged as a limitation and as a direction for future work.

The definition of DDEPs used throughout the dissertation excludes other digital tools and civic technologies used for community engagement by planners, including social media platforms, general website builders, videoconferencing tools, visualization technologies, or chatbots and survey tools used in isolation. Their exclusion means that findings are specific to this class of platform and should not be generalized to digital participation broadly conceived.

This study did not conduct external evaluation of individual engagement projects administered through DDEPs, nor did it access platform analytics or backend data. Data is limited to practitioner accounts and to the publicly visible features of platforms (although my own professional knowledge of the backend of these platforms facilitated interpretation of the administrative minutiae during interviews). Project-level outcome assessment that examines what engagement processes produced in terms of decisions, policies, or public influence would require different methods and levels of access and remains outside the scope of this research.

The analysis is qualitative and thematic. While some data, such as adoption timelines, regional distribution patterns, population statistics, and counts of tool deployment, was treated in quantitative terms, overall conversion of coded segments to numerical frequency was limited by design. This was an explicit methodological choice matched to the study's concern with how postpolitical dynamics are constituted and rationalized in practice and as revealed through the interview narratives. This is a question that calls for interpretive depth rather than numerical enumeration.

The Phase 1 national database captures DDEP adoption as it stood between March and September 2023. Vendor consolidation, platform feature changes, new adoptions, and platform changes have continued since that date. The empirical landscape documented in Paper 1 should be understood as a snapshot of a rapidly evolving environment. The theoretical arguments developed in Papers 2 and 3 are directed at structural dynamics that are more durable than specific platform configurations, but readers should not assume the adoption figures or platform descriptions reflect the current state of the field.

Finally, this research evolved from its original design in ways worth noting. As mentioned previously, the original proposal early in my PhD program included a third phase involving connective ethnographic and netnographic work: online participant observation, collection of archival engagement data, and fieldnotes drawn from direct observation of DDEP platforms in use. This phase was not carried forward, for the reasons described in Section 2.2. The exclusion of Quebec respondents and the scope adjustments that followed the removal of the ethnographic phase are all areas for future research.

Chapter 3 (Manuscript 1)
Assessing the Rise of Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms for Local Planning

This chapter establishes the empirical foundation for the dissertation by defining Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms (DDEPs) as a distinct class of participatory technology and documenting the extent of their adoption at the municipal level in Canada. Through a nationwide scan of 839 local and regional municipalities, the paper provides the first systematic accounting of DDEP uptake in the country. The key contributions of this chapter are: a clear and replicable definition of DDEPs that distinguishes them from other digital participatory tools; new empirical evidence revealing widespread municipal adoption, with a majority of Canadians residing in jurisdictions served by a DDEP; and documentation of a significant market consolidation around a single commercial platform provider. In doing so, the chapter makes the prima facie case that these platforms warrant the more critical scrutiny undertaken in Chapters 4 and 5. The paper also identifies three areas of scholarship—the platformization of public participation, the commercialization of deliberative democracy, and critiques of communicative planning—as the foundation for a more robust digital participation research agenda, which the subsequent chapters pursue.

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Assessing the Rise of Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms for Local Planning

Abstract

Digitally mediated participation in planning processes has grown significantly. In an emergent digital turn for participatory planning scholarship, there is a growing body of research attempting to trace this growth and grapple with its implications. This paper explores how planning scholars and practitioners can deepen their critical stance toward digital modes of participatory planning. In Canada, this approach becomes especially important given the recent and widespread adoption of a specific digital platform type used to support participatory decision-making at the municipal level. Across the country, many towns and cities have embraced what I call Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms (DDEPs). Despite their growing influence, these platforms for community involvement have not been previously quantified at a nation-wide level, nor thoroughly examined in planning scholarship. New evidence presented here defines DDEPs and documents the extent of their use by local and regional municipalities across Canada. In light of the growing prominence of these platforms, this article then provides the foundation for a more critical digital participation research agenda that draws on important debates in wider planning theory regarding democratic decision-making, the commercialization of deliberative democracy, and the platformization of public participation.

Keywords

public participation, digital engagement, platformization, municipal planning

3.1 Introduction

In planning, digital spaces are taking an increasingly prominent role in participatory process, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic when much in-person engagement had been forced into the socially-distanced realm of the virtual public sphere (Einstein et al., 2022; Milz & Gervich, 2021; Robinson & Johnson, 2021). For some, hope lies in the increasing power and ubiquity of web-based technologies and their potential to improve participatory decision making, especially over the deficient in-person processes characterizing the politics and participation of old (Åström & Grönlund, 2012; Kennedy et al., 2021). In local planning and urban design processes, new digital participatory tools hold the promise, or at least potential, to support more inclusive and democratic decision-

making. Indeed, across Canada, as this paper will demonstrate, municipalities have rapidly adopted a new category of digital platform that claims to advance the goals of deliberative democracy.

While scholars and practitioners have been taking note of the increasing digitization of public participation for several years, experimenting with new forms of online community engagement and assessing the risks and rewards, digital participation systems for urban and regional planning have been described as "still novel" (Hofmann et al., 2019, p. 3). And as Elstub et al. (2021) note, "despite recent developments, online deliberation research is still in its infancy" (p. 240). Calls persist for more empirical examination of the use of digital participatory tools in context (Cho et al., 2021; A. Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022a) and for more integration of these studies with planning theory (Potts, 2020). This paper responds to these calls for both more empirical evidence chronicling digital participatory approaches in local planning as well as a deeper engagement with planning theory in our examinations of digital engagement.

Beginning with a review of digital participatory planning literature, I make the case that the nascent digital turn in planning scholarship is overly focused on functionality and practical implementation questions for digital participatory technologies. Evaluative metrics and any theoretical framing, where it exists, are most often arranged around how these tools can help achieve the deliberative democratic goals of participatory planning. As this paper will demonstrate, digital participatory planning has not been fully drawn into the productive debates around theories of participation for democratic planning.

Following the literature review, I present new empirical evidence chronicling the digitization of democracy through the uptake of what I term Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms (DDEPs) at the local level. These platforms, a sub-set of what are referred to as Online Participatory Technologies in planning literature, are purpose-built multifunctional online hubs that consolidate multiple participatory projects across a municipality into one interactive digital engagement webpage. An emergent category of digital participatory software, DDEPs are increasingly shaping local planning processes across this country and elsewhere but have received little dedicated attention in planning scholarship. My findings indicate that a majority of Canadians reside within a local or regional government jurisdiction that uses a DDEP, with the bulk of these communities relying on a single commercial software provider, highlighting an ongoing consolidation of this platformization.

The widespread use of the DDEP platform type and the consolidation around a single commercial software provider provides a strong prima facie justification for a more detailed and critical examination of this phenomenon. In other words, while the extent of DDEP uptake in Canada indicates the platform's importance, it also warrants a closer, more critical examination to fully understand its implications. Indeed, the very nature and extent of DDEP uptake demands a more critical stance than the one offered by much digital participatory planning scholarship to date. I argue that to critically examine the deliberative claims and participatory planning impacts of digital platforms, we should be deepening our critical stance toward such technologies as practitioners and in our empirical research programs.

In the discussion, I draw on three areas of scholarship that offer important referential frames for examining the use of these participatory platforms in context: consideration of the platformization of public participation, the commercialization of deliberative democracy, and critiques of communicative planning. Taken together, these provide the foundation for a robust digital participation research agenda. The critical strands of theory pulled together in this paper also have practical implications for the practicing planner who is interacting with or deploying DDEPs in their local planning work. These implications are presented in the final section as a series of questions and reflections for planners and public engagement professionals involved in digital participatory planning.

3.2 Platforms for the Public Good and The Digitization of Communicative Planning

Following a brief period of optimism that the internet would help save our troubled democracies (Rheingold, 1993), the equivocal role of web platforms in politics in both authoritarian and nonauthoritarian societies has become widely recognized (Tucker et al., 2017). With some of the most pointed critiques arriving recently on a cresting wave of "techlash" (Botsman, 2018, para. 1), the "toxic hellscape" (Phillips, 2020, para. 1) of the internet and its capitalistic platforms have now been blamed for imperiling democracy itself in numerous insidious ways (Hindman, 2018; Jathan Sadowski, 2020; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). But standing in contrast to the rest of the contemporary internet "trash fire" (Nakamura, 2019, 00:08), some have highlighted the opportunities afforded by what can be labelled "civic tech", which broadly refers to "the use of technology for the public good" (Stempeck et al., 2016, sec. 1). This expanding ecosystem of technology-based

innovations built specifically for promoting positive civic outcomes includes web-based tools aimed at deepening democracy. Online, the civic tech space is made up of several converging fields, processes, and supportive technology products, including those related to government data and data collection, community organizing, crowdfunding, peer-to-peer sharing, and social networks (Patel et al., 2013). While there is much fuzziness in the definition of civic tech across the literature, I adopt the somewhat focused description provided by Gilman (2017) that centres democratic institutions and processes: civic tech is "technology that is explicitly leveraged to increase and deepen democratic participation" (pg. 745). This can include technologies developed by for-profit entities as well as publicly-funded projects—any innovations focused on collaborative and inclusive governance.

There are several stated or hoped-for benefits of civic tech for democracy. Gilman and Peixoto (2019), working with a framework developed by Smith (2009) for evaluating democratic innovations, outline four key democratic goods that civic tech has promised to deliver: inclusiveness (lowering barriers to participation and enabling a broader range of people to participate), popular control (providing everyday people with the information and entryways needed to influence decisions that affect them), considered judgement (emphasizing rational dialogue), and transparency (ensuring information and rules for dialogue are clearly presented to all participants). These democratic goods closely reflect principles of deliberative democracy, defined by Bohman (1998) as "any one of a family of views according to which the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision-making and self-government" (p. 401). Deliberative democracy is an approach that has become "the predominant framework in normative democratic theory" (Talisse, 2017, p. 108) and the "main game" in democratic practice (Curato et al., 2018, p. 2). And in scholarship on democracy and the internet, some deliberative theorists have arrived at a measured hope that civic tech can diverge from the big tech platforms and the toxic conflagrations of social media and address, rather than exacerbate, some recognized challenges of achieving a more deliberative democracy, even if they would not be a panacea (e.g., Gastil, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

One component of the deliberative civic tech ecosystem includes what Brabham and Guth (2017) refer to as "consultative layer" solutions—technologies that "provide a bridge or infrastructure for communication between citizens and government…typically for the sake of public consultation on government decisions, such as policies or urban plans" (p. 446). In planning scholarship, these are often referred to as Online Participatory Technologies (OPTs). Some digital participatory planning scholars bucket OPTs into two broad categories: those that were not specifically designed for public

engagement in participatory planning processes but can be used for such ends (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor), and those civic tech tools purpose-built for advancing participation and the public good (Afzalan et al., 2017; Fredericks & Foth, 2013). While OPTs have vastly expanded the potential opportunities for community members to engage with planning, how well these developments address the well-known obstacles to public participation has been the subject of some study (Afzalan & Muller, 2018; Gün et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020). In particular, planners have noted numerous and varied challenges of utilizing the first type of OPTs—those not explicitly designed for public participation—especially the attempted use of dominant social media platforms for collaborative decision-making (Afzalan & Muller, 2014; Kleinhans et al., 2015; Lin, 2022; Mattila & Nummi, 2022; Robinson & DeRuyter, 2016). But many participative planning practitioners have embraced the advent of the second OPT type—purpose-built civic tech—heralding a "new generation" (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010, p. 397) of public participation as the supply side of digital engagement software options has expanded significantly in recent years (Afzalan & Muller, 2018; Afzalan et al., 2017; Le Blanc, 2020).

Much of the planning literature examining OPTs focuses on describing the tech and suggesting various ways for how to better use or design the tools to optimize participatory process and take advantage of their advertised benefits (e.g., Afzalan & Muller, 2018; Glaas et al., 2020). Online participatory tools and their capabilities are catalogued (Afzalan et al., 2017; Ertiö, 2015), and functionality is probed (Hjerpe et al., 2018), while the more transformative claims are tempered (Levenda et al., 2020; Sieber et al., 2016), and practical challenges are outlined (Robinson & DeRuyter, 2016). While still an emergent area of study, a preponderance of the literature in planning that does examine digital participatory process is focused on these sorts of pros, cons, practical guidelines, and keeping pace with the latest technological developments. And in many accounts (e.g., Afzalan & Muller, 2018; Hofmann et al., 2019), effectiveness in achieving participation goals is evaluated against the normative principles of the dominant approach to democratic theory and conceptions of participatory planning—deliberative democracy and its planning correlate, communicative planning theory.

Over the past 30 years or more, communicative planning, rooted in deliberative democratic theory, has become the dominant approach to how planning is both taught and enacted (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998). Communicative planning asserts that through collaborative and consensus-based dialogue processes that incorporate different voices as

well as emancipatory knowledge, we can come up with just planning solutions and best approximate the public interest. What Healey (1992) described as the communicative turn in planning theory has gone on to inspire significant change in the practice generally (J. Carr, 2012; Legacy, 2023), as well as in digital participatory practice and scholarship specifically. Indeed, the communicative turn that has occurred alongside the evolution of participative internet technologies has come to define how many researchers and practitioners approach digital participatory planning.

Much of the writing in this digital participatory planning space offers planning practitioners helpful and practical recommendations for selecting and deploying various OPTs based on their abilities to support communicative practice or more deliberative processes. Researchers are often describing technical capabilities, explore opportunities associated with digital tools, and highlight challenges to successful adoption from the communicative planning perspective (Afzalan et al., 2017; Åström & Grönlund, 2012). For instance, empirical work assessing the use of digital participatory platforms in practice often utilize communicative planning and deliberative democracy markers, such as the importance of rational public discourse, collaborative process, inclusive dialogue, and consensus-building, as foundations for their evaluation. Gower et al. (2023), for example, explicitly link their assessment of an emerging digital participatory tool to communicative planning theory. Lin and Benneker (2022) develop a conceptual framework based on communicative planning principles for assessing a mobile digital engagement app (for other examples, see also: Fredericks & Foth, 2013; Glaas et al., 2020; Hjerpe et al., 2018; Levenda et al., 2020; Schulz & Newig, 2015; van der Does & Bos, 2021). And of the more planning theory-oriented works that critically examine the role of OPTs, many scholars have taken communicative planning theory, deliberation, and consensus, either implicitly or explicitly, as the foundational starting point of analysis, and both the means and ends of digital participation (Afzalan & Muller, 2018; Ertiö, 2015; Hofmann et al., 2019; Mattila & Nummi, 2022). For instance, Afzalan et al. (2017) state that participatory planning theories that are informed by communicative rationality (Habermas, 1984) should provide the normative insights to help us understand the role of OPTs and guide the adoption or selection of appropriate tools.

In sum, many planning scholars engaged in examinations of digital civic engagement focus on functionality and implementation questions for digital tools. And in any evaluative or theoretical framing, digital participatory planning scholarship often takes the deliberative conception of democracy as a given and builds from its corollary of communicative planning theory. While the adoption of the dominant approach to participatory planning for our investigations of digital

participation might seem obvious and benign, communicative planning and deliberative procedures themselves are subject to much debate in wider planning and democratic theory. In the wholesale adoption of communicative planning theory, digital participatory planning is missing these important debates and perhaps occluding a fulsome view of these platforms and their impacts. With little interwoven critique of communicative planning itself, there is a dearth of scholarship examining whether and how digital tools might replicate or exacerbate the deficiencies of deliberative participative approaches that have been identified in broader planning theory and in other areas of scholarship. Furthermore, the social and democratic impacts of digital platform arrangements themselves are not always thoroughly examined in participatory planning literature. I argue that a deepened critical scholarship around digital participation is especially important in light of the digital platformization and a consolidation of online public participation occurring in many Canadian towns and cities, described in the following section.

3.3 Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms: The Platformization of Participation in Canada

One example of civic tech that has received limited empirical attention and that by its nature demands that deepened critical scholarship are the subset of OPTs that I label Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms. As this section will establish, this unique platform type has seen recent, rapid, and widespread adoption at the municipal government level in Canada.

I define Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms as purpose-built civic technology explicitly designed to support public participation and collaboration through an easy-to-deploy web-based content management system intended to act as a hub to house multiple participatory projects, serviced by multiple digital participatory tools, all within one platform. They are usually designed to allow administrators with no web coding expertise to launch multiple engagement projects and administer the site. These tools are wholly distinct from social media platforms, such as Facebook and X (Twitter), or more general website builders and content management systems, such as Wordpress or Squarespace. Usually offered through a subscription-based software-as-a-service (Saas) model that is centrally hosted and proprietary (although some open-source examples do exist), DDEPs in Canada are primarily deployed by governments to support democratic decision making. They appear most often at the local government level, although they are also used by provincial and federal ministries

and agencies, school boards, health authorities, and Indigenous communities. Private sector actors also deploy DDEPs to solicit feedback directly from citizens on their proposals.

DDEPs can be understood as a sub-type of what Robinson and Johnson (2023) describe as "convenor platforms," which are "a platform urbanism tool that serves as a service and access intermediary between governments and their residents" (p. 76) (also described by Falco and Kleinhans [2018] as "digital participatory platforms"). What distinguishes DDEPs from these broader platform categories, however, is how they are advertised and promoted to municipalities as offering the ability to manage entire digital engagement processes, across multiple projects, providing residents with a single access point for all engagement opportunities in their local community. DDEP platform, PublicInput, for instance, promises a "community engagement platform that solves every dimension of your public engagement process" (PublicInput, n.d.).

Functionalities of DDEPs are bundled together and can include project information homepages; document and multimedia sharing; surveys and polls; discussion forums; collective idea and solution generation; storytelling spaces; collaborative mapping; participatory budgeting; synchronous virtual meeting spaces; participant databases and contact management; e-newsletters; analytics and reporting; 24/7 human moderation; and, increasingly, AI-driven insights, such as feedback and sentiment analysis or computer-assisted content moderation. These "Have Your Say" web pages provision the planner, proponent, or government authority with an entire suite of digital tools necessary to augment and extend more traditional in-person engagement techniques and conduct online dialogues (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

Screenshot of "Engage Ottawa" Dedicated Digital Engagement Platform Built Using EngagementHQ



For this research, I examined the adoption of DDEPs, as I have defined them, for all local and regional governments across Canada serving populations over 5,000 (local municipalities are the cities, towns, villages, townships, rural municipalities, or other types of local government entities; regional municipalities, where they exist, are groupings of neighbouring municipalities created by the provinces and territories for purposes like regional planning, managing shared services, and implementing various provincial policies). This sample included 149 regional municipalities and 690 local municipalities across the country. Using Google search, I navigated to and recorded all official local and regional government website URLs for all 839 of these communities included in the sample and searched those websites for links or references to any Dedicated Digital Engagement Platform being used by the government authority for public participation. Where I could find no obvious link to a DDEP through the government website, I also conducted Google searches using search terms such as "[municipality name] public engagement", "[municipality name] have your say", or "[municipality name] [platform name]". I also used similar search terms in French for municipalities in Quebec. Finally, I utilized the web technology profiling tool BuiltWith to search for additional engagement platform use across Canada that I might have missed. Municipalities that appeared to be using the platform as an engagement hub for multiple projects, rather than as a one-off for a single project, were included in the final count of DDEP users. All 839 communities were profiled in this way between March 4-12, 2023. Since that initial comprehensive review, some records have been updated based on new results reported by BuiltWith up to September 4, 2023.

My review of local and regional governments across Canada indicates that adoption of DDEPs is widespread. Of the 839 jurisdictions analyzed, over 30% (256) are using one of 9 DDEP software providers, with a small handful of communities (9) using custom-built engagement hubs. Platforms in use in Canada are summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms Used in Canada

Platform Name	Company Description	Number of Instances in Local and Regional Municipalities Over 5,000 Population
EngagementHQ	Founded in 2007 by software company Bang the Table in Australia; acquired in 2021 by US-based government technology provider Granicus	211
Social Pinpoint	Recently merged with another DDEP, The HiVE, and part of Australia-based MySite; Social Pinpoint also recently acquired MetroQuest, a longstanding British Columbia-based digital survey platform	9
Cocoriko	Quebec-based software; only used in Quebec in this sample	7
V+	Quebec-based software; only used in Quebec in this sample	5
Pando	Quebec-based software; only used in Quebec in this sample	5
PlaceSpeak	Vancouver-based	5
Zencity	Israel-based; recently acquired Canadian DDEP platform, Civil Space	3
ArcGIS Hub	Developed by American multinational GIS software company, Esri	1
CiviKit	Developed by Upanup, digital solutions provider based in Victoria, British Columbia	1
Other	Various custom-built solutions	9

DDEPs are more common at the local government level (over 33% of local municipalities sampled) compared to the regional government level (about 19% of regional municipalities sampled). However, nearly all local municipalities with over 250,000 residents across Canada utilize a DDEP for digital community participation, with the sole exceptions of Longueuil, Quebec, and Toronto, Ontario. (While Toronto has employed DDEPs for individual projects, it has not adopted a city-wide digital engagement hub for all projects and departments, and so was not included as a DDEP user by the definition created here.) Sixteen of those nineteen larger urban centres utilize EngagementHQ (see Table 3.2). DDEP adoption levels are highest in British Columbia (approximately 60% of that province's records) and lowest in Manitoba where only two out of the 31 communities included in the

study use dedicated participatory platforms (see Table 3.3 for a full summary). With the exceptions of Toronto and Iqaluit, every provincial and territorial capital city utilizes a DDEP, most using EngagementHQ.

Table 3.2

All Canadian Cities Over 250,000 Population and DDEP Use

City Name	Province	City Population (2021)	DDEP Platform
Toronto	Ontario	2,794,356	None
Montréal	Quebec	1,762,949	EngagementHQ
Calgary	Alberta	1,306,784	Social Pinpoint
Ottawa	Ontario	1,017,449	EngagementHQ
Edmonton	Alberta	1,010,899	EngagementHQ
Winnipeg	Manitoba	749,607	EngagementHQ
Mississauga	Ontario	717,961	EngagementHQ
Vancouver	British Columbia	662,248	EngagementHQ
Brampton	Ontario	656,480	EngagementHQ
Hamilton	Ontario	569,353	EngagementHQ
Surrey	British Columbia	568,322	EngagementHQ
Québec	Quebec	549,459	EngagementHQ
Halifax	Nova Scotia	439,819	EngagementHQ
Laval	Quebec	438,366	EngagementHQ
London	Ontario	422,324	EngagementHQ
Markham	Ontario	338,503	EngagementHQ
Vaughan	Ontario	323,103	EngagementHQ
Gatineau	Quebec	291,041	Cocoriko
Saskatoon	Saskatchewan	266,141	Custom
Kitchener	Ontario	256,885	EngagementHQ
Longueuil	Quebec	254,483	None

Table 3.3

Local and Regional Municipalities Sampled (Over 5,000 Population) and DDEP Instances

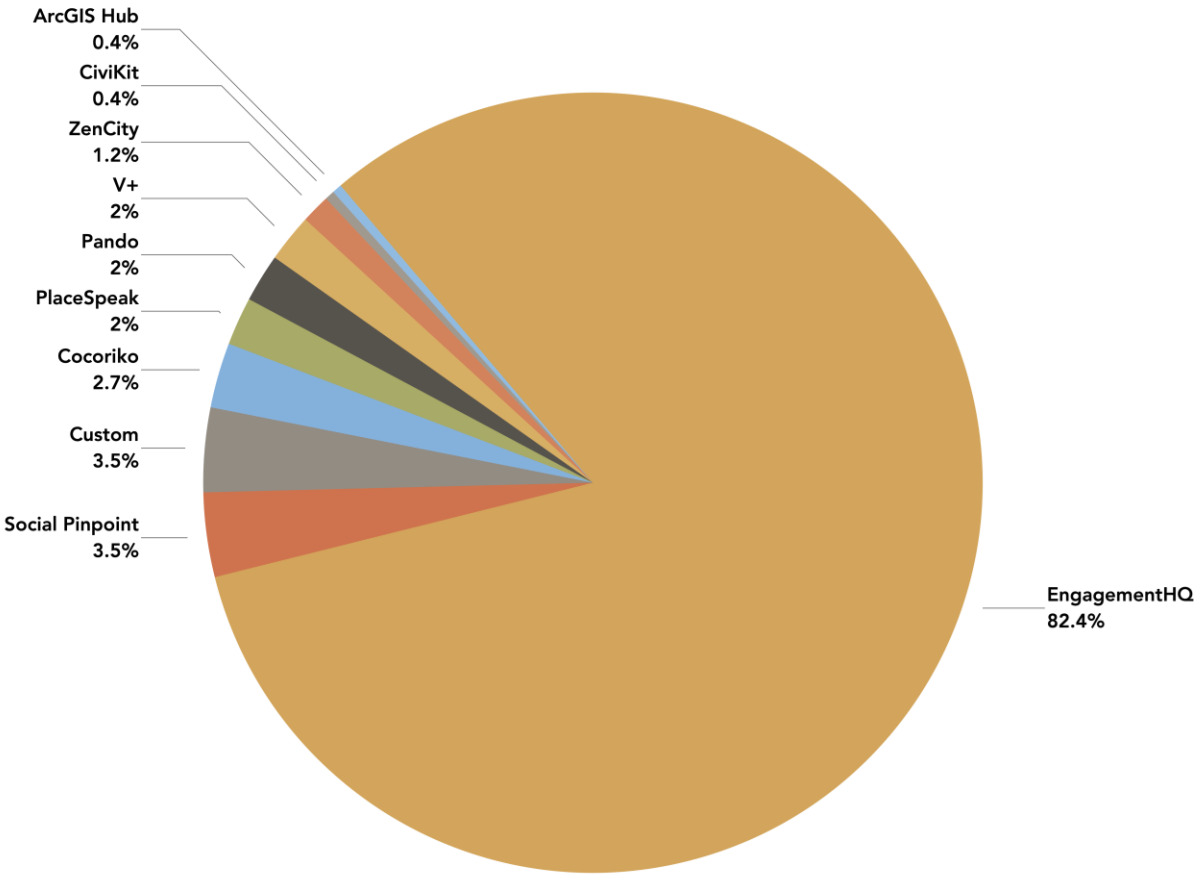
Province/ Territory	Total Local Municipalities Sampled	Count of Local DDEP Use/ Percentage of Total	Total Regional Municipalities Sampled	Count of Regional DDEP Use/ Percentage of Total	Totals
Newfoundland & Labrador	15	2 (13%)	-	-	2
Prince Edward Island	5	1 (20%)	-	-	1
Nova Scotia	19	6 (32%)	12	1 (8%)	7
New Brunswick	19	5 (26%)	-	-	5
Quebec	187	34 (18%)	81	3 (4%)	37
Ontario	228	90 (39%)	30	10 (33%)	100
Manitoba	31	2 (6%)	-	-	2
Saskatchewan	16	5 (31%)	-	-	5
Alberta	86	30 (35%)	-	-	30
British Columbia	81	50 (62%)	26	15 (58%)	65
Yukon	1	1 (100%)	-	-	1
Northwest Territories	1	1 (100%)	-	-	1
Nunavut	1	-	-	-	-
Total	690	227 (33%)	149	29 (19%)	256

When roughly calculating the population numbers contained within all local and regional municipalities that have adopted a DDEP, my research indicates that digital access to participation in municipal decision-making processes for the majority of Canadians is now mediated by a single platform provider. Of the local or regional governments included in this study that use a DDEP, over 82% (211 of 256 records) are using EngagementHQ (see Figure 3.2). In all, considering the list of municipalities in this dataset, roughly two-thirds of Canada's total population resides within a

jurisdiction that uses a DDEP, with the vast majority of those accessing online engagement opportunities with their local and/or regional government through EngagementHQ.

Figure 3.2

Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms Adopted by Local and Regional Municipalities Over 5,000 Population



Like many OPTs generally (Afzalan et al., 2017), these DDEPs that are sold to municipal governments in Canada are meant to give digital structure and expression to the normative deliberative democracy framework. According to their own promotional literature, DDEPs are part of a new generation of online participatory tools that aspire to create an internet space that embodies the virtues of deliberative democracy. And as Brabham and Guth (2017) have uncovered in their investigations of these and other consultative layer platforms, founders and designers of this type of

civic tech inject particular normative ideals of democracy into their products—namely, the predominant ideals of a deliberative conception of democracy. DDEPs specifically, I have found, hold promise for the communicative planner in their potential to deepen and extend rational and deliberative civic participation in planning and policymaking processes—all through one web portal. Social Pinpoint commits to "[e]nsuring your community has a positive and productive place to engage in deliberative dialogue" (Social Pinpoint, n.d., sec. 2). PlaceSpeak provides space for "deliberation without the pressures of time or peers that often results in simple and heated in person discussions" (Artibise, n.d., sec. 2). And coupled with careful engagement planning, DDEP platform, The HiVE (now part of Social Pinpoint), had claimed that it "is more than capable of supporting and enabling deliberative processes" (Lobo-Pulo, 2020, sec. 3).

EngagementHQ, in particular, purports to offer planners and communities a tool for "deliberative dialogue" (Butteriss et al., 2020; Crozier & Hussey, 2022), drawing a distinction with social media. EngagementHQ (Granicus, 2021) can "spur civil debate" (sec. 4) and "inspire deliberative dialogue" in part by "[taking] the conversation off of social media" (sec. 2). The platform is offered as a solution to the limitations of social media as a community engagement tool, which is "not a place for effective community engagement." Instead, its dedicated community engagement platform solves these issues, creating "a safe space for two-way dialogue between local leaders and stakeholders to brainstorm ideas, gather quantitative community data, and analyze the information quickly" (Granicus, n.d.-b, para. 3).

The growing influence of these platforms, the deliberative democratic claims they make, and the consolidation of digital participation around DDEPs and a single commercial provider at the local government level behooves planning researchers and practitioners to expand our typical approach to digital participatory planning outlined in the previous section. However, there is little scholarly research on the DDEP software type and no studies I could uncover that examine EngagementHQ, the most prominent platform in Canada, specifically. Considering the promises of these platforms and the nature of their adoption as I have outlined here, I believe there are three areas of scholarship that offer additional critical reflections that will help round out any future examinations of DDEP adoption for local planning.

3.4 Platformization, Professionalization, and Communicative Critique: Crucial Questions for the Era of Platform Participation

The Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms that I have identified as prominent in Canada have become an important part of the civic tech ecosystem that aims to deepen democracy and extend deliberative involvement in municipal decision making. Considering that growing prominence, the ways in which these new digital intermediaries in democratic process are likely reworking participatory planning and refracting the relationship between planners and community members warrants critical attention from planning scholarship. What sort of critical attention does the nature of DDEP proliferation warrant? As I have outlined earlier, much of what is written about technology-enabled participatory planning takes the deliberative conception of democracy as a given and builds from its corollary of communicative planning theory. But as Brabham & Guth (2017) have highlighted in their discussion of consultative civic tech generally, "[c]ontracting with the consultative layer without critical reflection may normalize particular visions of democratic communication embedded in the technology platforms it produces" (p. 446). While several researchers have evaluated various digital engagement technologies against the objectives of furthering deliberative democracy, very little research explores how participatory platforms might extend and exacerbate the limitations of this dominant approach to democratic decision-making—limitations that are being thoroughly debated and are well-recognized in wider planning and democratic theory.

In this discussion, I urge those deeper investigations of DDEPs that go beyond the template set by much of digital participatory planning research to-date. A deepening of our critical stance as both practitioners considering the use of DDEPs and scholars investigating their impacts would mean moving beyond cataloguing features and functionalities and beyond evaluations centred solely on communicative planning conceptualizations of participation. In this discussion, I will draw attention to some additional helpful frameworks that will push researchers and practitioners to reflect in other ways about the emergence and influence of DDEPs. These important critical perspectives have implications for local planners by generating new questions for those working with or deploying DDEPs. The three areas of scholarship I will highlight here—platformization, the professionalization of participation, and an application of agonistic critiques of deliberative democracy to digital participation—bring additional nuance, widening the digital turn already underway in participatory planning theory and practice.

3.4.1 Platformization

Granicus (n.d.-a) describes EngagementHQ as, "An all-in-one digital community engagement platform that helps you balance everything your community needs to be engaged" (sec. 2). But what exactly is a "platform" and how can we think about their impacts? Internet scholarship examining platforms and platformization is the first area of critical theory that can generate important questions about the increasing prominence of DDEPs. Poell et al. (2019) define platforms as "(re-)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetisation, and circulation of data" (p. 3). A common example of end-users and complementors would be you as an end-user purchasing a handy new to-do list app from a third-party developer (a complementor) through your mobile phone's app store (the app store itself being the platform, owned and operated by the platform owner, such as Apple or Google). Or a host (a complementor) creates a listing page and rents out their apartment to a tourist (end-user) through AirBnB (the platform owner). These are multi-sided markets in which much of the value creation for the platform is occurring outside of the platform owner by these complementors, which has allowed platform businesses to scale so rapidly (Parker et al., 2016).

In the circumstances under study here, end-users could be understood as the community members offering their feedback on planning issues and interacting on the DDEP. Complementors are the local governments who are operating their engagement initiatives on the platform they have licensed (they are also the platform owner's clients). The platform owners (Granicus, Social Pinpoint, etc.) create and license the platform and define the "platform boundary resources" and "platform affordances"—the platform's tools that define technical access to the platform, terms and rules that govern its use, and the features that shape and dictate user-complementor interaction.

But platforms are so much more than a technical construct or a business model. The term "platform" is also deployed by software companies as a discursive construct, one that implies an openness and neutrality invoked in a way that elides or obscures a tension between neutrally serving communities and the business imperatives that guide the platform company (Gillespie, 2010). Platforms are also a growing piece of societal infrastructure, but one that is entangled with an opaque "corporate-computational infrastructure" (Pierson, 2021, p. 1). As Poell et al. (2019) go on to describe, platformization refers to "the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life" and a

process that sees "the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms" (p. 5-6). They have, as van Dijck et al. (2018) assert, "penetrated the heart of societies" (p. 2). Platforms, they argue, "do not reflect the social: they produce the social structures we live in" (p. 2). The platform is more mediator than intermediary, "because it shapes sociocultural performance rather than merely facilitating tools" (Andersson Schwarz, 2017, p. 377). The ways in which the platform business model is transforming and governing the economy and many facets of public and private life extends to democratic processes and key aspects of urban life as well—a process or state of affairs also under study in the burgeoning field of "platform urbanism" (Barns, 2020).

These perspectives should prompt planners to reflect upon and work to understand both the positive and limiting affordances that shape platform use and thereby dictate the format, depth, and extent of democratic process taking place thereon. Through its rules, terms of use, technical capabilities, templates, defaults, and setup, all of which limit its use and modification, how does a DDEP delimit or pattern democratic interaction? Despite its modularity and somewhat autonomous deployment of the platform by its government complementor, boundaries and affordances ultimately bracket participation. There is a risk that a measure of technological determinism of DDEPs will shape and limit the structure of local democratic processes. Planners also need to consider how "proprietary opacities" of platforms (Mackenzie, 2019, p. 1989)—under-the-hood proprietary code that determines how the platform functions—could shape what community members can say, how they can participate, who can participate, and who will be heard. In one example, as Robinson and Johnson (2023) have found, platforms for public participation appear to be positioned "towards more limited, unitized forms of participation" (p. 74).

Furthermore, while the platforms themselves may be promoted to enable bottom-up participation from community members, implementation in all the cases recorded for this study are inherently top-down—the local or regional municipal government is the platform licensee and administrator, dictating which projects they will consult with the community on via the platform and which tools and depth of participation will be enabled. With plug-and-play standardized tools for democratic participation, dictated by platform affordances as well as structured top-down by government implementors, could there be misalignment with local contextual realities or the democratic desires of the community? While platformized participation allows for rapid and easy deployment of engagement projects (and efficient and assumingly more profitable service delivery by platform providers), what is the trade-off between the use of standard tools and context-sensitive

engagement design? Or as Ghose and Johnson (2020) ask, if "Smart City" projects are opening up new channels of public participation, are other existing channels being simultaneously closed off?

Governments and planners utilizing the more popular DDEPs in Canada should also be considering the implications of these affordances being created by third-party for-profit software developers. What happens when a singular platform becomes an essential piece of the infrastructure of democracy in the local communities of so many Canadians? What is the effect of proprietary algorithms potentially moderating democratic debate online or processing input from participants? What are the ethical obligations of planners to understand and disclose this automation (Robinson, 2022)? And in addition to concerns about data privacy when using commercial software tools, what are the impacts on an engagement process when data quantity is privileged over data quality (Robinson & Johnson, 2023)? As Wilson and Chakraborty (2019) urge, discussions about the benefits for community members of new technologies deployed to support public service delivery cannot be an afterthought: "Which technologies are deployed, what types of data collected, and who has access to those data are all fundamentally important questions that determine to whom the potential benefits of Smart City development are distributed" (p. 42-3). The platformization perspective challenges planners to critically reflect on how platforms like DDEPs both expand and constrain participatory practice and to consider the likely beneficiaries and the potential unintended consequences.

3.4.2 Professionalization

Examinations of the professionalization of public participation is another relevant area of scholarship that raises important questions for practicing planners and could be linked to critical analysis of DDEP proliferation. In some parallels with the platformization literature, professionalization research draws attention to similar market forces and logics of standardization, consolidation, interoperability, and efficiency, and their impacts on participatory planning. As Lee (2015) has established, public engagement can now be considered an entire "industry." The field has become a large, professionally-serviced ecosystem comprised of various for-profit and non-profit actors who are paid to supply public engagement facilitation services and products (Lee, 2015). This ecosystem includes the sale of deliberative solutions and the marketing of specialized public engagement consultants to clients, including public sector managers (Hendriks & Carson, 2008; Lee & Romano, 2013). Increasingly, the deliberative industry as it intersects with participatory planning is defined and legitimized by its own standards and credentialing systems (Barry & Legacy, 2023). And it is an industry that is not only

responding to market demands for deliberative solutions, but in some cases can be a driving force in the ongoing participatory turn in local government (Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2020). I would situate DDEPs as one of the deliberative commercial goods developed and sold as part of this "market of participation" (Hendriks & Carson, 2008; Lee, 2015; Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2020).

There are several implications associated with the commercialization of deliberative democratic ideals and the professionalization of participation. It is a complicated field wherein the public participation professional is working not only on behalf of the sponsor of the engagement process (the paying client), but also, purportedly, in the interests of citizens involved and on behalf of democratic values more generally (Bherer et al., 2017). The professionals involved are often well aware of the tensions associated with the professionalization of public participation (Lee, 2015). However, there are risks that the "expertise" required in professionally administered community engagement processes can be used to shield the process itself or the outcomes from critique. Public deliberation and the "channeling" of participation into approved processes can become "a technique to manage stakeholder disillusionment and unrest" (Lee & Romano, 2013, p. 735). For instance, as a case study by Lederman (2019) of an expert-driven engagement process found, the "performance" of participatory planning can be "deeply constrained by rules set from on high" and that "analyses of participation must move beyond the interpersonal practices that characterize these forums to examine the rules and regulations that govern them and the ability of participants to change these rules" (p. 94). And while professional standards for public participation professionals encourage a minimum level of quality and can legitimize a process, questions arise around how standardized frameworks might stifle creativity or hinder contextually sensitive approaches (Legacy et al., 2023).

Drawing these critiques into this discussion of digital participatory planning, I am raising a concern about how digital participatory tools, especially those becoming as widespread as DDEPs, might extend or exacerbate the problematic elements of the professionalization of public participation. Technical tools, such as DDEPs, deployed by these same participation professionals may further their ability to "narrowly [frame] the empowerment dimension, with participants granted little control over the scope and nature of participation" (Lederman, 2019, p. 98). Planners working with these commercial tools of public participation need to be aware of the ways digital platforms circumscribe participation—both inadvertently and by design. When resources are directed to expert-driven processes and purpose-built platforms, how are those spaces of engagement legitimated or elevated while other mechanisms, including more activist, informal, or community-driven

contributions, are devalued or ignored? How are the platform companies, like any participation professional, balancing their obligations to their paying clients and their commercial interests with their purported commitment to democratic values? And when using off-the-shelf products, no matter their flexibility or how well their design is informed by engagement best practices and positive democratic values, what constraints are placed on a more context-sensitive process?

3.4.3 Deliberative Antipattern

A final area of scholarship I will connect to digital participatory planning in order to generate questions about DDEP use are the critiques of communicative planning that have animated planning theory debate over the last two decades. As outlined earlier, much of the theory and practice surrounding digital participation presupposes the deliberative conception of democracy and the corresponding principles of communicative planning theory. And this deliberative framework extends to how participatory planning scholars and practitioners have engaged with new digital consultative tools and how the platforms themselves are designed. In broader planning theory, however, the tensions and contradictions of the predominant communicative conception of participation have long been debated (Brownill & Inch, 2019). Important critiques of deliberative democracy, emanating from conflict-oriented conceptions of democracy and "postpolitical" critiques of consensus, underpin what is referred to as an agonistic planning approach. These two frameworks, communicative and agonistic, and the dialectic between the two, form the pillars of our contemporary theoretical conceptualizations of participatory planning. However, many examinations of digital technologies for participatory process have not been structured onto this dual foundation and have side-stepped the important debates happening across this spectrum. By incorporating wider planning theory debates (described briefly here) into our analysis and use of DDEPs, I raise new questions about the implications of the platformization of local participation.

Shortly after deliberative frameworks began to gain purchase in democratic theory, important debates and critiques emerged (Dryzek, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Mouffe, 1999; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2002). Echoing and inspired by these debates, communicative planning faced early and vociferous criticism (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002; Huxley, 2000; Mäntysalo, 2002; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998) that has pushed, expanded, and modulated planning theory in important ways (Allmendinger, 2002). These critics explore how there is a concurrent and paradoxical empowerment and disempowerment of citizens during deliberative participation processes, wherein citizens are

given a "voice," but their involvement serves to legitimate the process and the outcome—an outcome which may only reflect existing power asymmetries (Koch, 2013). This participation theatre can give the false impression of empowerment while simply enabling the more efficient advancement of predetermined projects (Aylett, 2010). The deliberative requirement for everyone to "act democratically" can be used to stifle dissent (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998, p. 1984) while the choreography of participatory events can become a kind of blanket justification for whatever decision is made, insulating the process from truly democratic debate (Lederman, 2019). The drive to eliminate conflict and dissensus in service of rational consensus that legitimates powerful interests can lead to a so-called "postpolitical" condition, defined by Swyngedouw (2018) as a "process by which consensual governance of contentious public affairs through the mobilization of techno-managerial dispositives sutures or colonizes the space of the political" (p. xv). This displacement of the political and an overemphasis on consensus results in "impotent participation" (Swyngedouw, 2018, p. 23).

Researchers such as Inch (2012), Lederman (2019), and Ruming (2018) have used this postpolitical framing to diagnose deficient participatory processes in planning case studies. This diagnosis of a postpolitical condition leads many to advocate a more agonistic planning remedy (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Grange, 2014; McAuliffe & Rogers, 2018; Pløger, 2004; Purcell, 2009; Silver et al., 2010). Agonistic theorists argue that rather than striving to erase power and ignore exclusion, our conception of democracy should "bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 34). The prominence of this debate within planning scholarship has driven a significant amount of scholarly output over the past decade or more, establishing communicative and agonistic theories as two pillars of contemporary planning research (Aylett, 2010; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Bond, 2011; Kühn, 2021; Legacy, 2017; McClymont, 2019; Özdemir, 2019; Özdemir & Tasan-Kok, 2019; Silver et al., 2010; Van Wymeersch et al., 2019; Yamamoto, 2017).

Despite their centrality to broader participatory planning theory, digital participatory planning research does not often acknowledge the communicative-agonistic debates. By leaving aside an entire body of critical democratic theory, we risk replicating an "antipattern" in both our theorizing about digital engagement and in the design of platforms. Coined originally as a term in software design, an antipattern points to a common solution to a recurring problem that appears appropriate and effective but ends up creating more problems than it was originally intended to address (Koenig, 1998). The

antipattern I am warning of here is that digital engagement literature in planning risks replicating and accelerating long recognized limitations in deliberative democratic theory and its corollary of communicative planning research and practice. That antipattern focuses primarily "on institutional/cultural barriers preventing true participation and on the search for approaches and technologies to overcome these barriers," while ignoring the position that holds "participation as a consensus-building activity that systematically depoliticizes the participatory process by suppressing conflicts and agonistic resistance" (Monno & Khakee, 2012, p. 86).

We should undoubtedly evaluate DDEPs against their stated intentions to advance deliberative democracy. But digital participatory planning theorists and practitioners need to be aware of the limitations we are introducing when our conception of democracy becomes wholly synonymous with deliberation and communicative planning. As Kohn (2000) warned over 20 years ago, "placing deliberation at the center of political theory has certain effects which must be interrogated" (p. 426). Similarly, we must interrogate the effects of placing deliberative planning at the centre of digital participatory theory and participatory platform design.

Like with critiques of communicative planning, digital planning theorists and planning practitioners need to probe the power dynamics in the process of the imposition of these new tools, paying mind to Miraftab's (2009) warning of "dominance through inclusion" (p. 32). In this way, DDEPs can be evaluated as a potential example of postpolitical structure. On their surface, and from my own experience in practice, these platforms certainly appear at risk of contributing to the creation of "tightly designed and managed spaces where questions that unsettle particular forms of power-over and hegemony are foreclosed" and "reducing democracy to a set of curated and superficially participatory events; 'dumbing down' policy for simple consumption by citizen consumers" (Legacy et al., 2018). The various tools available as part of a local government DDEP can give the veneer of openness, transparency, and participatory opportunity, but risk replicating the careful stagecraft that is part of the broader "fantasies of consensus" (Inch, 2012, p. 532) that characterize planning process. Furthermore, in these highly structured spaces of dialogue, where can residents ask more fundamental questions about their hopes for their cities? And, as Barney et al. (2016) ask, what are the "other forms of participation that might be obscured by excessive promises of digital utopias" (p. viii)?

Another more subtle way DDEPs could contribute to a postpolitical climate is that, from my own observations, these tools often see limited involvement from citizens. While there are several

instances of the use of DDEPs that garner lots of participation measured in clicks, the volume and the depth of participation is often quite limited. This in itself should be of concern as planners and politicians can point to the very existence of such easy and convenient ways for citizens to participate as an opportunity to "engage" that was just not taken up by the citizenry. When every project is inviting you to "have your say," planning's much-maligned practice of DAD (Decide, Announce, Defend) is being replaced by what Metzger (2017) terms "the more insidious and manipulative UNCLE (Unlimited Neverending Consultation Leading to Exhaustion)" (p. 188).

Overall, there is a danger that digital participatory governance may be yet another and potentially more powerful way for state actors to simultaneously claim to empower citizens while using a participatory mechanism to bring order to a process or bracket out dissent. In the same way postpolitical theorists are engaged in important critiques of communicative planning, we should be asking additional fundamental questions about digital democratic spaces. Not only questions about whether these tools deliver on their promises of a more equitable and citizen-led process, but to what extent are they, in their application, more about managing conflict, part of a broader set of "tightly designed participatory planning processes" (Legacy, 2017, p. 427)?

Agonistic and post political critiques help us elevate the concerns that government-sponsored digital engagement can be deployed through DDEPs to bring order to digital inputs and extend formalized processes of inclusion, encompassing (vastly) more citizens in sanctioned spaces of participation, potentially contributing to the procedural dimension of planning as social control (Yiftachel, 1998). Just as postpolitical critics do with traditional participatory planning, we need to question the platformization of participation itself, rather than treating the participatory act as both the end goal and the measure of success (Radil & Anderson, 2019). Our understanding of the impacts of digital participatory planning will benefit from more of these types of critiques built on more empirical examinations of specific platforms in use in specific planning contexts.

3.5 Conclusion

Internationally, the accelerating digitalization of planning overall is receiving dedicated attention (Batty & Yang, 2022). With this paper, I offer a contribution to this dialogue by highlighting and defining an increasingly important but understudied digital participation tool in need of closer examination. Through a nation-wide review of the platformization of participation in Canada, I have established the widespread adoption of commercially developed Dedicated Digital Engagement

Platforms for participatory governance at the local level. Overwhelmingly, municipalities that have adopted DDEPs are utilizing one platform provider. This new empirical evidence offers a snapshot of how contemporary digital public participation is conducted by many local and regional governments across the country. However, the primary limitation of this empirical investigation is that this study provides only that surface-level snapshot of municipal government DDEP use. And that snapshot excludes communities under 5,000 population, leaving DDEP usage for the smallest communities uncharted. Subsequent research will need to probe the use of these platforms in greater detail and in context. As I have established here, the very nature and widespread usage of DDEPs warrants this sort of critical examination by planning researchers, alongside a heightened level of scrutiny from practitioners.

While DDEPs as I have specifically defined and catalogued them here—consolidated one-window platforms for a community's entire digital engagement efforts—have received limited empirical attention in planning literature, there is an emergent digital turn in participatory planning theory that has been working to keep pace with the rise of OPTs generally, with empirical studies characterizing their use and some conceptual work grappling with their implications. This nascent digital turn is often focused on software functionality and case studies of in-practice use, with any theoretical framing largely hitched to the well-established communicative turn that continues to drive much of planning theory and practice today. I am advocating for a widening of the digital turn in participatory planning literature, going beyond the focus on platform functionality or an evaluation of digital engagement from a communicative planning perspective. Otherwise, we risk replicating and perhaps accelerating the known limitations of the predominant conceptions of participatory planning through our digital engagement efforts.

Table 3.4

Practical Questions for Practicing Planners

Platformization
• How does the design, features, rules, and limitations of a DDEP shape the format, depth, and extent of participation? • How might the hidden workings of the platform (its code and algorithms) affect what people can say or do in the engagement process? • Are the standard tools for democratic participation provided by DDEPs a good fit for a community's specific needs, or do they miss the mark? Is there a sufficient level of modification possible? • Considering that DDEPs are often implemented in a top-down manner by governments, how might this impact what projects are chosen for community consultation and how people can participate? • What are the ethical considerations regarding data privacy and the role of proprietary algorithms in moderating democratic debates? What are the ethical obligations of planners to understand and disclose algorithmic automations of platforms?
Professionalization
• How do platform business interests and the logic of standardization impact the authenticity and effectiveness of participatory processes? • How are platform companies balancing their obligations to their clients, commercial interests, and democratic values? • In what ways do commercial tools like DDEPs limit or dictate the scope and nature of public participation? • How does the funneling of online participation to DDEPs affect who and what gets listened to? What are the implications for other, potentially more grassroots, or community-driven forms of participation?
Critical Participatory Theory
• How do digital engagement methods address or obscure existing power asymmetries and citizen empowerment? • In what ways might DDEPs be limiting genuine democratic debate or fostering a consensus that masks deeper conflicts? • How might the use of DDEPs encourage real debate and not simply stage-manage conflict or moderate it out of the process? • Beyond the apparent ease and convenience of digital participation, how can we evaluate the true depth and inclusiveness of engagement through DDEPs? • How do DDEPs either contribute to or challenge a top-down and technocratic mode of planning?

To structure future phases of research, I offer ways to scaffold our analysis of digital participation more fully onto the productive debates that have been animating internet and democracy

scholarship and participatory planning theory over the past decade. As a starting point for the kind of theory-informed empirical inquiry needed to better trace the outlines of the platforms that are increasingly mediating participation in local decision making, I am bringing awareness to how the forces of professionalization, platformization, and digital postpolitics may be combining to reshape the landscape of participatory planning in Canada. These other areas of scholarship generate a series of important questions for researchers that I have raised throughout this discussion. Linkages to other areas of scholarly debate and the questions they generate can also equip practicing planners with a more critical lens for assessing the appropriateness of new digital tools for participation, for better managing their implementation, and for better understanding their potential democratic impacts (summarized in Table 3.4). At a time when digitally mediated participation in planning decision-making is becoming more central and as the internet is indelibly altering democratic societies at large, we need to provision planning practitioners and theorists with as many tools as we have available to critically engage with digital technologies.

Chapter 4 (Manuscript 2)
Handwaving Participatory Planning: The "Ongoing Experiment" With Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms

This chapter moves from the empirical landscape established in Chapter 3 to the practice of platformized participation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 44 professionals involved in the procurement, implementation, and administration of DDEPs across 33 Canadian municipalities and three platform vendors, it examines how these platforms are adopted, managed, and rationalized in municipal planning contexts. To structure this analysis, I developed a four-part platformization framework—adoption, administration, affordances, and assessment—that provides a new analytical lens for examining how platform logics penetrate participatory planning practice. The key contributions of this chapter are: a transferable conceptual framework for analyzing the impact of digital platforms on participatory planning; grounded empirical evidence, drawn from practitioners who have collectively administered hundreds of DDEP-mediated engagement processes, revealing how a mix of rapid adoption, shallow deployment, and tightly managed online spaces risks a performative handwaving of participatory process; and practical recommendations for aligning platform functionality with participation goals. Because Chapters 4 and 5 draw on the same 44-interview dataset, readers will notice some overlap in the description of research methods.

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Handwaving Participatory Planning: The "Ongoing Experiment" With Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms

Abstract

Problem, research strategy, and findings: Municipal planners and local governments are increasingly using digital platforms to support participatory decision-making. In Canada, the adoption of dedicated digital engagement platforms (DDEPs)—a new generation of web-based software purpose-built for public engagement—has become widespread. Despite their proliferation, these platforms have received limited scholarly attention, underscoring the need for critical examinations of their use in context. In this study, I investigated how DDEPs shape engagement processes through interviews with 44 professionals involved in their adoption and administration across Canadian municipalities, with lessons relevant to jurisdictions elsewhere. Guided by critical perspectives on digital platforms and urban governance, the findings reveal both perceived benefits and significant challenges. While DDEPs may improve accessibility and efficiency, they also introduce new constraints on participation. The most used platforms, combined with prevailing municipal implementation practices, may unintentionally limit the democratic ideals these technologies are marketed as embodying.

Takeaway for practice: This research provides a conceptual framework for analyzing the impact of platforms on participatory planning. Applying this framework to interview findings, I distill key practitioner insights and offer recommendations on aligning platform functionality with participation goals, ensuring adequate administrative capacity, critically assessing how platform design shapes engagement, and developing clear metrics to evaluate whether platforms meet their democratic objectives. Absent intentional design and ongoing care, mere adoption of digital engagement platforms can devolve into a kind of performative *handwaving* of participatory process.

Keywords

digital engagement, municipal planning, participatory planning, platformization, public participation

"I think generally the move to more virtual platforms is still a bit of an ongoing experiment. I don't think we've refined this entirely yet."

—Manager of planning at a rural county in Ontario

"I think sometimes people see it as the silver bullet, and then they can just wave their hands and go, okay, see, we engaged."

—Community engagement specialist in a city in Ontario

Though planning is sometimes noted for its slow adoption of new technologies (Daniel et al., 2023), there is a digital turn (Boland et al., 2021; Charlton et al., 2023) occurring across the various components of planning practice. Surveys of practitioners reveal a variety of established everyday digital tools that have become embedded in everyday practice (Potts & Webb, 2023) as well as bleeding-edge technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence (Park et al., 2023; Wright, 2023), that planners and allied professionals are experimenting with on the job. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the digitalization of various planning functions (A. Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022b), particularly civic engagement, as participatory exercises traditionally conducted in person were forced online (Milz & Gervich, 2021; Robinson & Johnson, 2021).

After a period when "planning theory literature has largely ignored the role and impact of information and communications technologies" (Potts, 2020, p. 272), research is coming around to a recognition of these digital shifts and a reckoning with the changes wrought by technology. Still, researchers' understanding of municipal government use of digital tools in local planning contexts is running behind the pace of innovation and the rate of adoption. In particular, there is a need for real-world examinations of evolving technologies in public engagement (Cho et al., 2021; Hafferty et al., 2024; A. Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022a).

In this study, I explored one manifestation of the digitalization of participatory planning: local governments' growing reliance on dedicated digital engagement platforms (DDEPs): web-based software purpose-built for civic engagement. Functionally, DDEPs are turnkey Have-Your-Say websites that municipal staff can launch with no technical coding expertise, bundling surveys, idea boards, moderated forums, and other online feedback tools into a single digital space for gathering public input. These platforms have become important infrastructural intermediaries of technology-enabled participation, developed and marketed to public-sector clients across North America and

beyond. Canada presents a particularly compelling context for study, as its municipal governments have been early adopters of DDEPs, with widespread uptake at the local government level (Boyco, 2024). As a practicing planner in Canada, I have also seen firsthand how these platforms are widely integrated into municipal processes. And though this case study is focused on Canada, the same platforms commonly used in this country, and others like them, are deployed by municipal governments in the United States, in Australia, across Europe, and beyond (Granicus, 2025; Kleinhans et al., 2022; Social Pinpoint, 2024). Moreover, the lessons drawn from this platform type are broadly applicable, given that the nexus of planning and technology is now recognized as a "global phenomenon deserving of more academic attention" (Boland et al., 2021, p. 2).

To better understand how DDEPs shape engagement practices, I conducted interviews with 44 individuals across Canada with collective knowledge and experience in the development, sale, procurement, and use of these platforms. I explored whether these recent digital engagement innovations address—or reinforce—identified shortcomings of participatory planning processes. To structure the investigation, I drew from critical participatory planning scholarship and platformization literature, which has examined the penetration of digital platform infrastructures and economic models into various sectors and aspects of daily life.

To present this analysis, I developed a framework that captures key aspects of the platformization process:

1. Adoption: How municipalities evaluate and acquire DDEPs.
2. Administration: How municipal staff use, manage, and maintain the platforms in practice, including decisions about how features are implemented.
3. Affordances: The built-in design features and technical capabilities of the platforms that shape, enable, or constrain engagement possibilities.
4. Assessment: How practitioners evaluate the effectiveness and democratic impacts of DDEPs.

This framework provides a new analytical lens for examining digital participatory planning, raising new research questions with direct implications for public participation practice.

The next section provides a more detailed overview of DDEPs, followed by a description of the research methods and data interpretation approach. The Findings and Discussion section presents insights from the interviews, structured through the four-part platformization framework. Rather than

evaluating individual engagement projects, I foreground the voices of municipal officials who have collectively administered hundreds of participatory processes using DDEPs. In centering their experience and expertise, I offer practical insights for planners and researchers who interact with these now-commonplace platforms. These include lessons on how and why DDEPs are adopted in local government, the challenges of administering and maintaining them with limited capacity, how platform design shapes the nature of public engagement, and how their impacts are assessed in practice. By clarifying these dynamics of platformization, the study contributes both a conceptual framework and grounded evidence to support more critical and effective use of digital engagement platforms in planning contexts. Taken together, the findings reveal how a mix of rapid adoption, shallow deployment, and tightly managed online spaces risks a kind of handwaving engagement: a digital gesture that signals participation while sidelining deeper deliberative process.

4.1 Background

Communications technologies and digital platforms now structure significant portions of citizen–planner interactions. Sometimes referred to in planning literature as online participatory technologies (OPTs) (Afzalan et al., 2017), these tools "offer different and possibly more effective ways to support the participatory component of planning processes" (Afzalan & Muller, 2018, p. 163). Planners and government officials host meetings and collaborative processes on synchronous communications software (Milz et al., 2023), crowdsource public feedback on asynchronous platforms (Alizadeh et al., 2019), use 3D visualization software to engage focus groups (Gower et al., 2023), and experiment with scaling collaborative planning on large social media sites (Lin, 2022). These digital approaches have long been promoted as remedies for the deficiencies of conventional participation formats, representing "an entirely new generation of forms and practices of public participation that promise to elevate the public discourse in an unprecedented manner while providing an interactive, networked environment for decision-making" (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010, p. 397).

Increasingly, planners are turning to specialized software designed to promote positive civic outcomes, what Afzalan and Muller (2018) referred to as "planner-led OPTs" (p. 164), distinguishable from general purpose tools like Zoom or Facebook. These include software developed for or adopted by public officials to better interact with residents, described by Robinson and Johnson (2023) as "convenor platforms" (p. 75). One specific subset of convener platforms is what I call dedicated digital engagement platforms (DDEPs): unique software purpose-built to support

participatory planning processes, used primarily by local governments. These platforms power many municipalities' Have-Your-Say websites, providing a centralized hub where residents learn about local government projects, answer surveys, pin comments on maps, and share ideas. Designed for ease of use by both the public and municipal staff, DDEPs can be deployed without web development experience and are typically offered as subscription-based services by for-profit vendors. Administrators can activate different tools, from simple information pages to interactive and deliberative features such as moderated forums or participatory budgeting modules. By centralizing all of a municipality's engagement projects and bundling digital participatory tools into a single interface, DDEPs structure participation through predefined input formats and carefully managed digital spaces designed to streamline and better promote civic engagement. Examples of how municipalities in this sample have used their DDEPs include gathering public input on road safety concerns for transportation master plans, crowdsourcing playground redesign ideas, and hosting moderated discussions on official plan updates.

The major vendors of these platforms promise to foster richer, more inclusive, and more trustworthy public dialogue, especially over traditional in-person methods. Social Pinpoint (2025) is touted as "a comprehensive digital platform that facilitates meaningful and accessible engagement opportunities that bring your community together" (sec. 1). Granicus's EngagementHQ platform enables exchanges online "that would never take place face-to-face" (Granicus, 2022, p. 13), offering a "complete, unified engagement platform" that lets governments "converse across multiple channels, improve community connection, and gain insights faster" (Granicus, 2023, sec. 5). PlaceSpeak (2025) claims that its platform "builds instant trust through dynamic, real-time and transparent dialogue" (sec. 1).

There is, however, an emerging critique of the more optimistic claims about the role and influence of technology in planning (Potts et al., 2024). The emergent field of digital participatory planning scholarship offers several empirically documented and theorized challenges associated with technology-enabled engagement, highlighting how it creates new problems while reinforcing existing obstacles to effective public participation (Afzalan & Muller, 2018; Aitken, 2014). Scholars have raised concerns about persistent digital divides (Boland et al., 2021) and potential exclusion (Gower et al., 2023), privacy and security risks (J. Sadowski & Pasquale, 2015), algorithmic bias (Broussard, 2024), and the shallowness of digital interactions, which can limit their capacity to build trust (Robinson & Johnson, 2021).

While scholars have examined digital participatory planning for nearly two decades (e.g., Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006), our understanding of how specific tools perform across contexts, the distinct challenges they introduce, and the conditions under which they can fulfill their democratic potential remains incomplete. Researchers have therefore advocated for more empirical studies on the impact of digital technologies on participatory planning. Cho et al. (2021), for example, emphasized the need for case studies, interviews, and other methods to better understand how public engagement platforms are used and why cities adopt them. Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones (2022a) similarly argued that research must explore how digital technologies are used by both citizens and planners, the new forms of engagement they facilitate, and the ways they transform the nature and scope of participation.

Planning practitioners, too, need a sharper view of platform opportunities and limitations. As the planning manager quoted at the outset of this article noted, the municipal turn to DDEPs is "a bit of an ongoing experiment" in need of further refinement. The danger, flagged by another official, is that digitalizing participation could become handwaving engagement, wherein merely adopting digital tools is taken to mark a deeper form of participation. As Hafferty et al. (2024) cautioned, "decision-makers sometimes view technological innovation as inherently beneficial, downplaying or tacitly denying the influence of context, purpose, and power dynamics," a mindset that ultimately "risks reducing transparency, accountability, inclusion, and agency" (p. 3). Considering such risks, Gower et al. (2023) argued that planners must step in as "critical gatekeepers" (p. 672) to uphold ethical participatory practice when technology becomes an intermediary in democratic process.

However, dominant theoretical approaches to participatory planning may not fully capture the unique challenges, opportunities, and nuances of technology-enabled community engagement. Here, platformization theories offer new lines of inquiry to examine how digital tools reshape participatory practices. Platformization describes the process by which digital platforms have layered their technological, economic, and infrastructural logic over so many aspects of our lives, "penetrat[ing] the heart of societies" and reorganizing and producing the very social structures we inhabit (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2). Robinson and Johnson (2023) positioned the rise of convener platforms within the broader phenomenon of platformization, where urban life, governance, and infrastructure are reshaped by platform-based technologies that collect, process, and monetize data—often referred to as "platform urbanism" (Barns, 2020; Leszczynski, 2020). They argued that urban planners have both an ethical and practical obligation to consider how the public interest is maintained when using these

tools, emphasizing the need to scrutinize platform design and functionality to ensure these technologies do not undermine the inclusion and democratic goals of public participation. Rather than assuming technology inherently facilitates more communicative processes, planners must examine how platforms operate and the ways they influence public participation.

In this study, I aim to provide researchers and practitioners with lessons from real-world users of participatory technologies, with an eye to the implications of platformization. Guided by critical participatory planning theory and platformization scholarship, the analysis treats digital engagement platforms as active intermediaries in participatory process. This approach highlights how the digital scaffolding that undergirds urban interaction is neither neutral nor value-free. These systems come with a unique set of practical effects and ethical implications.

To better understand these effects and implications of public participation as mediated through DDEPs, I developed a four-part framework to examine the platformization process and phenomenon. Adoption, the first part of the framework, focuses on how municipalities discover, evaluate, and decide to implement DDEPs. This process is shaped by peer influence, vendor marketing, and the perceived need for innovation. Drawing from "diffusion of technology" literature (Rogers, 2003), this lens foregrounds the social dynamics of platform selection. The second part, administration, refers to the ongoing management and operational aspects of DDEPs after purchase. Administration examines staffing roles, the challenges of maintaining the platforms, and how implementation decisions on platform oversight and risk tolerance impact community participation. This includes questions about "assimilation" (Fichman & Kemerer, 1999), the process by which a technology becomes integrated into an organization's systems after initial adoption.

Affordances, the third part of the framework, examines the built-in design features and technical capabilities of DDEPs that enable, direct, or constrain user interaction. Rather than the flat, neutral, expansive, and edgeless constructs that their moniker suggests, digital platforms are non-neutral and bounded technical systems, the intentional design features of which heavily pattern their use (Gillespie, 2010). In practice, DDEP affordances shape the possibilities for interaction, the nature and extent of administrative control, and the opportunities (or limitations) for public deliberation. Finally, assessment examines how the performance of DDEPs is judged. This element looks at participation reach, dialogue quality, and longer-term impacts on trust and decision quality as well as comparisons with offline methods. It draws on collaborative planning evaluation research (Innes &

Booher, 1999) and platformization literature highlighting how platforms mediate power and prioritize certain values, such as efficiency or market logic, over democratic inclusivity (Morozov, 2014; van Dijck et al., 2018).

4.2 Methods

The purpose of this research was to examine the use of DDEPs in context as an increasingly common intermediary in municipal planning processes across Canada and beyond. The four-part framework I developed for this research served as a tool to develop the interview guide and structure the data analysis. Framed within the broader penetration of platform tools and logic into urban life, this study examines DDEPs as a novel force in participatory governance by interviewing practitioners using these tools. This section details the methodology for this qualitative study, including data collection, analysis, and study limitations.

4.2.1 Data Collection

I used a multistage, purposeful sampling approach to identify "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2014, p. 466) to understand DDEP adoption and impacts. The focus on Canadian municipalities arose from my own professional planning experience in these jurisdictions and my observations of the widespread uptake of this participatory platform type. To define the sample frame, I conducted a review of all local and regional municipalities with populations greater than 5,000 to identify which governments used which platforms for administering civic engagement (Boyco, 2024). A snapshot analysis conducted in March 2023 revealed that more than 30% (n = 256) of 839 municipalities were using one of nine commercial DDEP providers, with a small handful of those communities (n = 9) using custom-built engagement hubs.

From this narrowed sample frame, I conducted a collective case study of multiple municipal DDEP users, applying purposeful maximal sampling to capture diverse perspectives on platform use (Creswell, 2013). I initially contacted 82 potential key informants, selecting municipalities that varied in geography, government structure (local and regional), population size, and platform choice. This also included representatives from major DDEP providers operating in Canada. The intention in my group characteristics sampling method was to gain maximum variation, documenting a range of experiences while identifying common patterns in platform use (Patton, 2014, p. 405).

Ultimately, I conducted 44 semistructured interviews between October 2023 and February 2024. Participants included municipal planners, public participation and communications professionals, and others responsible for procuring, implementing, and managing digital engagement platforms in 33 different municipalities. I also interviewed three representatives from leading DDEP vendors (EngagementHQ, Social Pinpoint, and PlaceSpeak). Interviews were conducted primarily by video conference, with some by phone or in person. Conversations ranged from 25 to 107 minutes, with an average of 48 minutes, resulting in more than 33 hours of recorded and transcribed data. All interviews followed a semistructured format guided by a set of key questions tailored to each interviewee's role. This allowed for consistent thematic exploration while enabling flexibility to delve into unique experiences and insights.

4.2.2 Data Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify both descriptive and interpretive themes. Descriptive coding captured explicit elements, including platform administration structures, year of platform adoption, professional titles of interviewees, and where responsibility for platform administration resided. Interpretive themes emerged through a process of iterative coding and memowriting, informed by critical participatory planning theory and platformization scholarship. Through this process, I developed the four-part analytical framework (adoption, administration, affordances, and assessment) that both reflected recurring themes in the interview data and aligned with theoretical insights from the literature. These categories did not entirely precede data analysis but emerged from it and were refined throughout the transcript review, coding, and ongoing literature review process.

Once established, the four-part platformization framework provided structure to the analysis and helped clarify conceptual boundaries. For example, adoption captured how municipalities discovered and evaluated DDEPs; administration focused on how platforms were managed internally; affordances described how in-built platform features shaped engagement possibilities; and assessment reflected how practitioners evaluated the platforms' performance. This framework guided subsequent rounds of coding and interpretation.

4.2.3 Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the purposeful sampling method introduced self-selection bias, as findings reflect only the perspectives of those who agreed to participate, potentially omitting other perspectives on DDEPs. Second, this research did not independently evaluate individual engagement projects conducted through DDEPs; findings are based solely on the experiences and assessments of the municipal officials interviewed. Third, the study focused exclusively on Canadian local governments, excluding provincial or federal agencies and private sector users. Efforts were also made to include participants from Quebec, but no prospective interviewees from that province responded, meaning some regional platform variations were not captured. Fourth, this research did not examine public perceptions or experiences with DDEPs, limiting insights into participant-side dynamics. Fifth, though some data were quantitatively interpreted, code conversion to frequency was limited. Finally, although not necessarily a limitation (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020), intercoder reliability was not assessed, as I alone conducted the coding process as the primary researcher.

4.3 Findings and Discussion

This section presents key insights from the interviews, organized according to the four components of my platformization framework. While the interviews surfaced a range of perspectives, I focus here on the most prevalent themes, patterns, and challenges of the ongoing platformization of public engagement and its implications for participatory planning.

4.3.1 Adoption

The uptake of DDEPs in Canada is widespread. As of March 2023, nearly one-third of municipalities with populations greater than 5,000 had integrated these platforms into their planning processes, and all but one of Canada's 20 largest cities had adopted this platform type (Boyco, 2024). Of the 256 documented users, 247 adopted a paid software service from for-profit developers. The market is largely dominated by EngagementHQ, used by 82% of municipalities in my national scan. Originally developed in Australia, EngagementHQ is now owned by the U.S.-based GovTech provider Granicus. Notably, several municipalities had recently switched, or were considering a switch, to Social Pinpoint, another Australian-founded platform and the main competitor in Canada to Granicus's offering.

Among the 33 municipalities represented in the interviews, 10 used a formal request for proposal (RFP) process to select a platform, evaluating factors such as cost, features, and experience working with municipalities. Thirteen municipalities directly awarded contracts to their chosen platform providers, while the adoption process for the remaining 10 could not be determined. In both RFP and direct-award cases, the active marketing and sales efforts of EngagementHQ and Social Pinpoint played a key role in platform choice. EngagementHQ also benefited from being an early entrant to the Canadian municipal market in 2015.

Interviewees cited various reasons for their platform choice, but adoption was often driven by peer influence rather than a fulsome strategic evaluation. One municipal community engagement staffer noted, "I think they probably just looked at everybody else, and everybody else is using this one." Municipal officials described how knowledge about engagement practices and technologies spreads through formal and informal networks of municipal public-sector officials. Platform adoption, especially of the popular EngagementHQ software, by neighboring or comparator municipalities gave comfort or became a motivator to keep up with innovative engagement practices. As one engagement manager in Ontario put it, the adoption of EngagementHQ spread through "word of mouth." That individual described having an online platform as an unquestioned minimum, or "table stakes," and a status indicator of "keeping up with the Joneses."

The platform adoption motivator uncovered here correlates with Rogers's (2003) "diffusion of innovation" model, which suggests the spread of technology is very much a social process. While some municipalities conducted formal evaluations, diffusion was more often spurred by the reassurance gained from observing and communicating with earlier adopters. Rather than a clear strategic rationale, it was the status-conferring drive to appear innovative and level with peer municipalities that drove adoption in many cases. This raises the risk of what Rogers referred to as "overadoption": when an innovation is adopted without sufficient knowledge and more for its prestige-conferring aspects rather than an objective assessment of its practical benefits. Planners and public participation professionals should be mindful of this dynamic and critically assess whether a platform aligns with their engagement needs before committing to its use.

Another primary driver of adoption was the desire for an alternative to social media for conducting online public engagement. Many interviewees appreciated having a software solution that was purpose-built for civic participation, rather than relying on major social media platforms. Eleven

municipalities had explicit policies to exclude social media feedback from their engagement processes, avoiding any attempt at deliberative dialogue on those platforms. A community engagement manager in eastern Canada stated, "Social media is not a place where we're actually engaging, full stop. We don't take your feedback on Facebook; we don't take your feedback on Twitter."

Instead, these municipalities sought to redirect local planning conversations on social media to their dedicated platforms. A director of corporate communications who oversaw engagement efforts in an Alberta municipality described their approach:

> *We try and encourage people who are taking part in the dialogue on say, Facebook, for instance, [to] take the conversation over here; this is where we're listening. Here [on social media], this is not being captured as data for the project. If you do it over here [on our DDEP], it's being captured as data for the project.*

Engagement process managers appreciated the control they could exercise within the dedicated and formalized digital spaces offered by DDEPs, compared with social media. For a manager of planning in Ontario, DDEPs felt "more controlled" and "more comfortable for municipalities." A manager of public engagement in a large city appreciated the ability to "direct the conversation" on their platform and that, unlike social media, "it all feels very controlled [and] there are benefits to that." Another director of corporate communications put it this way:

> *The way that I formulate it in my head is that they [the public] see social media as sort of their own playground. … It's their space, their time, their arena. And then when they hit EngagementHQ, they've come into our house. And so, there's a little bit of a higher level of expectation. … They are a little bit more subdued, reserved, thoughtful with the way that they engage on that platform.*

The strategic shift from social media as a site of engagement toward DDEPs carries notable implications for public participation. By adopting DDEPs, local officials gain cover to ignore—or at least not officially engage with—conversations on traditional social media platforms. However, in ceding that ground, local governments may (intentionally or unintentionally) forgo the "positive frictions" of resistance and agonistic engagement occurring on social media (Williamson & Ruming,

2019). As a result, municipalities can more credibly sidestep community resistance by directing participation into officially sanctioned digital spaces.

4.3.2 Administration

Effective administration of DDEPs depends on who manages the platform and how they oversee the participatory process. Many municipalities acknowledged that, either by choice or by necessity, they were not taking full advantage of their platform's capabilities. Capacity constraints, knowledge gaps, and insufficient resources for digital engagement often shaped how municipalities managed these platforms. These constraints led municipalities to limit platform feature deployment, favoring closed survey tools that required minimal monitoring and maintenance over two-way dialogue features. As one community engagement practitioner in Ontario noted, "the issue with … these platforms billing themselves as deliberative democracies is … there's a lack of capacity on staff's end to be able to manage that part." Similarly, a director of communications in Alberta explained that their DDEP included online discussion forums as a feature, but due to the "daily management" these tools demand, the municipality opted to only use basic surveys and polls.

A lack of technical knowledge and internal capacity was a recurring theme. Half of municipal interviewees (n = 21 of 41) cited insufficient resources and capacity constraints as a major barrier to fully leveraging DDEPs. An engagement manager in an Ontario municipality noted that, "The feedback I get from staff all the time is those approaches are just so time-intensive and laborious that they don't have the capacity to do it." A respondent from a regional district in British Columbia echoed this concern, describing how staff found the platform's administration "a bit overwhelming" and questioned whether they could "actually manage it."

Beyond resource limitations, many municipalities were reluctant to open digital spaces for public dialogue due to risk aversion and concerns over online discourse. A manager of community planning in a rural Ontario county using EngagementHQ shared this hesitation:

> *I'd be afraid of opening up the tool, allowing a lot of back and forth amongst community members, because completely unfiltered things can often get uncivil. And that's not helpful for anybody.*

These reserved administration choices have implications for community engagement. DDEPs, like other digital platforms, benefit from so-called network effects, which occur when the

value and utility of the platform increases with the number of users, creating a positive feedback loop that encourages further adoption (Shapiro & Varian, 1999). This phenomenon is particularly significant for platforms that facilitate interactions among users, as each additional user enhances the experience and utility for all others. Network effects are strengthened by both more internal users deploying the DDEP on their municipal projects and more external users (members of the pubic) participating in the online dialogue and feedback opportunities. However, in many municipalities, engagement tools were underused because of capacity constraints. Coupled with evidence of limited participation from members of the public, network effects were not realized.

With less than fulsome deployment of their platform and unrealized network effects, several municipalities appeared to be experiencing a widening of what Fichman and Kemerer (1999) described as an "assimilation gap." This gap emerges when "vendors and other stakeholders may communicate a vision of an emerging technology's main features and benefits based on what it would be like to use the technology at its network potential, rather than its likely initial performance level" (Fichman & Kemerer, 1999, p. 261). Without fulsome assimilation of the technology internally and an uptake by participating members of the public to stimulate network effects, adoption alone will not fulfill the technology's promise. It is a reminder for practitioners and researchers examining digital participatory technologies that technology diffusion should focus on deployment, not just adoption. It is possible that certain innovations will see rapid diffusion but may never approach full assimilation, thereby reducing their expected impact.

The factors contributing to the assimilation gap—capacity constraints, knowledge gaps, and risk-averse cultures—were common across many municipalities. Those considering DDEP adoption may not fully anticipate these challenges to deep assimilation of a technology. Without learning from the limitations and assimilation challenges experienced by their peers, they risk investing in a sophisticated tool that remains underused. Practitioners should avoid committing to technologies based solely on acquisition trends and instead consider the challenges and timelines of full deployment. Ultimately, unless the potential network effects of the platforms are achieved, including widespread internal assimilation and uptake by the public, they will not achieve their promised impacts of efficiency and improved democratic decision making. As Fichman and Kemerer (1999) cautioned, "Practitioners may commit to a technology based on a belief that pervasive adoption is inevitable, when it is not" (p. 255). Researchers, they go on to advise, should "be guarded about

concluding, based on sales data, that an innovation is destined to become widely used." Instead, a closer examination of how platforms are administered is needed.

4.3.3 Affordances

For municipal engagement platforms, affordances directly affect how residents access information, provide input, and interact with planners and each other. Interviewees described how the specific capabilities, technical features, and design of their chosen participatory platform shaped both their administrative choices and the nature of participant interaction. Several noted that while DDEPs offer useful tools for structuring engagement, their standardized design and limited flexibility sometimes constrained the depth and quality of interaction. Others expressed concerns about inadequate technical support and the rigidity of certain platform features, which did not always align with their engagement needs.

One of the most frequently cited impacts of platform affordances was the ability to scope and control engagement more intentionally than in traditional, in-person settings. Many municipal officials saw this as an advantage, allowing them to establish clear parameters for participation. As an engagement manager in eastern Canada put it, "Sometimes, you know, people need parameters around how they provide their feedback." Many officials found that in using a DDEP, it was easier to assemble and enforce those parameters compared with in-person engagement events. Another engagement specialist described how their DDEP was custom-built to facilitate this control: "Just because it's built for it, and we have a bit more control over the conversation we're having, I think it works better for engagement."

In practice, this scoping and controlling was often conducted by limiting the participatory tools deployed on a project. Many municipalities relied primarily on surveys, rather than the full suite of interactive features including discussion forums, collaborative mapping, and participatory budgeting. This cautious approach was often driven by risk aversion and concerns about widening the scope of dialogue. One manager of community engagement in Ontario could not recall a single instance in which their municipality had used the more deliberative tools in their 6-year history with the platform, driven by a "concern about opening it wide open to people." A director of corporate communications in another Ontario community reported a similar experience. Over 7 years of using a DDEP, their municipality had "mostly stuck with surveys," citing a lack of confidence in their ability to properly monitor and moderate open forum discussions. Another Ontario engagement manager

noted that departments across their municipality preferred a "closed system" to ensure that "a really active participant group doesn't then sway the outcome of a project."

The ability to better scope and control engagement, combined with the ease and efficiency of setting up digital participation opportunities, meant that in some cases, municipalities shifted scarce resources away from in-person engagement. A community engagement official in Ontario expressed concern about a possible narrowing of the empowerment potential of participatory process due to a preference for the control afforded in these online spaces:

> *I've heard that from colleagues, not necessarily in [our municipality], but other places of, all of a sudden, now they just use Engage [their DDEP], and they don't want to do any in-person, they don't want to do the outreach. They don't want to do any relationship-building. And the platform really lends itself to more of a project management approach to engagement, and not … relationality, not so much the building, the building those connections, and connecting people to the democratic process, connecting people to decision-making. It's really just a single tool. And I think sometimes people see it as the silver bullet, and then they can just wave their hands and go, "Okay, see, we engaged."*

The top-down design of DDEPs and carefully curated online engagement spaces allows municipal officials to bracket dialogue and control conversations more easily than in traditional public meetings. Fewer quality in-person engagements coupled with an ability to limit more open and deliberative processes online could result in more instances of the "transactional" (Johnson et al., 2020) engagement that characterizes digital interactions and "more limited and unitized forms of participation" (Robinson & Johnson, 2023, p. 74). This dynamic is not just administrative; it is enabled by platform affordances: the option to select non-deliberative tools, templates that privilege one-way information provision, and the impact of automated dialogue moderation tools.

Because of these affordances, DDEPs risk becoming what Legacy et al. (2018) describe as "tightly designed and managed spaces" contributing to a "postpolitical" participatory planning process (p. 355). Postpolitics refers to processes where tight moderation and control and an emphasis on civil consensus-building "systematically [depoliticize] the participatory process by suppressing conflicts and agonistic resistance" (Monno & Khakee, 2012, p. 86). In this context, DDEPs can create the appearance of openness, transparency, and participatory opportunity, but they risk replicating the

carefully stage-managed approach to participation. A senior communications official in an eastern Canadian city summarized this concern:

> *So, it looks good. It looks like we're engaged. [But] we're not. … I think there's more of a danger, because it is called an engagement platform. Everything is "have your say."*

The impact of DDEPs on democratic participation is not predetermined; it is patterned by the affordances embedded in each platform and by how municipalities choose to activate them. In practice, those affordances enable a more structured engagement, which might reinforce pre-existing limits on public involvement.

4.3.4 Assessment

Although this study did not independently evaluate individual projects, I asked interviewees to share their perspectives on the impact of these platforms, drawing from their subjective experiences or any internal evaluation data their municipality may have gathered. Collectively, interviewees noted several perceived benefits of DDEPs. Officials from 18 of the 33 municipalities reported a real or perceived expansion and diversification of participants with the platform. Several believed they were reaching people who would not have participated in person. An engagement manager from a large western Canadian city noted, "We are reaching a wider audience, which we may just not be reaching when we go to a community hall and ask people to come." Another engagement official in Ontario observed, "We get a broad swath of people engaging with us online. … It gives us depth." Some interviewees also suggested that this wider reach included a more diverse set of participants. Other commonly cited benefits included improved access to project information, increased transparency, ease of use for participants, the removal of certain barriers to participation, and enhanced data collection and reporting capabilities.

While DDEPs were frequently praised for expanding outreach, evaluations often revealed a disconnect between their intended democratic potential and their realized outcomes. Interviewees identified several shortcomings and negative implications. Some mirror issues that have long bedeviled conventional participatory planning (challenges reaching diverse groups, engagement fatigue, low participation rates, capacity constraints), while some described new problems unique to digital engagement. The most frequently cited negative impacts included limited platform

functionality, inadequate technical support, persistent digital divides, and insufficient internal capacity or technical knowledge to fully implement the platform. In several cases, these limitations led to concerns that digital engagement through DDEPs can be shallow (lacking depth or opportunities for sustained and detailed dialogue) and narrow (failing to attract a broad or representative set of participants).

Overall, interviewees' assessments of DDEPs paint a complicated picture. While some viewed them as an effective tool for expanding and diversifying participation, others highlighted the gap between their marketed benefits and their actual performance or real-world impacts of their use. This underscores the need for more critical examinations of how platforms shape participation, echoing the warning of Boland et al. (2021) that while digital technologies offer "important and interesting opportunities for public participation in the planning process … [they] are not solutions to many of the problems associated with engaging those people who are not involved in the planning process" (p. 13).

In some cases, interviewees' perspectives indicated that DDEPs exacerbate the extant limitations of communicative planning processes, reinforcing tokenism (Levenda et al., 2020) or even supercharging postpolitical participation, where a veneer of technology-enabled openness and accessibility is used to provide cover for more efficient advancement of predetermined solutions. As a manager of engagement in an eastern Canadian city noted, "I think that these platforms could be used very cynically … [t]o look like you're engaging, because you've got a website, but not actually doing anything."

4.4 Conclusion

The growing prominence of DDEPs reflects a broader trend of digitalization in planning, with significant implications for how public participation is structured and facilitated. While DDEPs offer clear benefits from the perspective of some municipal officials—including expanded outreach, diversified participation, and streamlined data collection—this study highlights critical challenges that limit their democratic potential.

DDEP adoption is often driven by peer influence and vendor marketing, with decisions prioritizing perceived innovation over strategic evaluation. Their administration is frequently constrained by limited resources, risk aversion, and insufficient capacity to fully implement their features. Platform affordances, while enabling structured and controlled interactions, can also curtail

opportunities for open dialogue and deeper community connections. And public officials' assessment of DDEPs revealed a disconnect between the platforms' marketed benefits and their real-world impact, as issues like shallow engagement, digital divides, and low participation rates persist.

Although rooted in the Canadian context, this study has broader relevance for other jurisdictions, considering the growing popularity of digital participatory platforms in many other planning contexts globally. The findings surface challenges for planners deploying digital engagement tools: peer-pressure adoption dynamics, capacity-driven assimilation gaps, risk-averse feature rollouts, and the tendency for platform affordances to narrow deliberation. Further, the four-part framework for analysis could be applicable for other types of platform technologies being adopted by planners, including the coming adoption of powerful new AI tools. The results underscore that adopting digital platforms is not necessarily synonymous with achieving meaningful engagement and democratic outcomes. Instead, the ways in which these platforms shape, enable, and constrain engagement may replicate the limitations of traditional public participation while introducing new challenges unique to digital environments.

One unique challenge posed by new digital intermediaries is that these innovations make it easy to create an appearance of deep, transparent engagement without fostering real empowerment, or a kind of handwaving democratic process. The four-part framework for examining the platformization of participation highlights how the platforms themselves are non-neutral and determinative forces in how local governments involve community members in decision making. However, the framework also reveals lever points where planners can exercise agency in how digital tools intermediate the participatory process. Future comparative research could explore the adoption, administration, and affordances of platforms in other contexts, shedding further light on their implications for the practice of participatory planning.

Chapter 5 (Manuscript 3)
The Platformization of Postpolitics: How Software Is Eating Participatory Planning

This chapter brings the theoretical architecture developed in Chapter 1 to bear on the practitioner accounts gathered in Chapter 4, applying a postpolitical lens to diagnose how platform architecture and administrative practice together constitute depoliticization in digital participatory planning. Where Chapter 4 examined the platformization of participation through a practice-oriented framework, this chapter reinterprets the same 44-interview dataset through postpolitical critique, asking how DDEPs structure participation in ways that align with, reproduce, or intensify postpolitical dynamics. The key contributions of this chapter are: the development of a postpolitical account of the platformization of participation, organized around three interconnected mechanisms—the scoping and control of dialogue, the sanitization of dissent, and the performance of openness—through which DDEPs function as postpolitical infrastructures; empirical demonstration that these mechanisms are stabilized through routine administrative choices that practitioners characterize as mundane, reasonable, and professional; and the argument that DDEPs enable a visible and administratively legible form of participation while systematically bracketing contestation. Because Chapters 4 and 5 draw on the same interview dataset, readers will notice overlap in the description of research methods.

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The Platformization of Postpolitics: How Software Is Eating Participatory Planning

Abstract

Digital engagement platforms are now routine infrastructure for public participation in local planning. Drawing on a nationwide study of Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms (DDEPs) in Canada and interviews with 44 practitioners responsible for administering these systems, I develop a postpolitical account of the platformization of participation by examining what happens when participatory planning processes are assembled inside standardized software environments. Through mechanisms of scoping and control of dialogue, sanitization of dissent, and the performance of openness, I reveal how DDEPs actively constitute and entrench postpolitical conditions through their embedded logics of order and manageability.

Keywords

digital engagement, municipal planning, participatory planning, platformization, public participation

In 2011, Silicon Valley venture capitalist Marc Andreessen published a triumphalist essay proclaiming that "software is eating the world" (Andreessen, 2011, para. 1), predicting that software-driven disruption would eventually swallow virtually every industrial sector. Fifteen years later, this disruption is manifest in the platformization of many spheres of social and economic life, extending deep into government and civic spaces, including planning. The widening "digital turn" in planning practice (Boland et al., 2021, p. 4) has seen the integration of advanced visualization software (Uribe & van der Heijden, 2022), powerful data analytics (Ferré-Bigorra et al., 2022), and, more recently, planners' experimentation with generative artificial intelligence (Park et al., 2023; Wright, 2023). As part of this transition, digital platforms have assumed a central role in participatory processes (Robinson & Johnson, 2023), promising more inclusive and democratic governance in local planning and urban design.

A new class of participation software claiming to advance deliberative-democratic goals is seeing rapid uptake in local planning contexts (Boyco, 2024). These purpose-built software systems, what I call Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms (DDEPs), bundle surveys, discussion tools, and engagement workflows into a unified web product increasingly used by municipalities to host and

manage public participation. Despite their growing prominence, the adoption of DDEPs does not constitute a neutral expansion of democratic terrain. DDEPs are more than planning and engagement support systems; they are technopolitical mechanisms whose architecture and governance practices mediate power. These platforms actively structure participation through standardized interaction formats, administrative workflows, and data outputs that shape what becomes sayable and actionable within planning processes. They are, in Winner's (1980) terms, artifacts that have politics. By encoding certain assumptions about participation, DDEPs represent the latest technological manifestation of what Moini (2017) identifies as a "growing institutional offer of participation" (p. 129) that is decoupled from substantive influence on decision-making.

While planning scholars have examined the growth and implications of digital participatory planning for two decades (e.g., Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Robinson & DeRuyter, 2016; A. Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022a), much of this scholarship focuses on functionality and implementation (cataloguing tools, assessing usability, outlining practical challenges), with evaluative metrics and theoretical framing organized around the deliberative-democratic aims of participatory planning. Fewer scholars have examined whether these tools reproduce the failures of dominant conceptions of participation itself. As Potts (2020) argues, planning theory has largely ignored the role and impact of digital technologies, particularly those used for participatory decision-making. Digital participatory planning has not been fully drawn into the foundational debates that structure contemporary participatory planning theory—namely, the communicative-agonistic debates and postpolitical critique of how participatory processes can foreclose contestation through techno-managerial procedure.

Drawing on these debates, I ask what happens when public engagement is assembled inside standardized software environments with their own architectures and governance practices. And I explore how platforms structure participation in ways that align with, reproduce, or intensify postpolitical dynamics. The analysis is practitioner-focused, examining how DDEPs are governed and rationalized by those responsible for administering them rather than how members of the public experience participation. I take postpolitical theory as an analytical lens for examining the mechanisms through which everyday administrative practice can render political questions technical. Empirically, I draw on a case study of DDEP adoption and use in Canada, combining a scan of municipal platform uptake with interviews with 44 professionals responsible for procuring and administering these systems. This analysis of local and regional governments found substantial DDEP

uptake across Canada (Boyco, 2024). Interviews were conducted with planners, public participation practitioners, and communications professionals in 33 municipalities, as well as representatives from leading platform vendors, generating accounts of how DDEPs are configured and governed in everyday practice.

These accounts reveal how DDEPs can be understood as postpolitical infrastructures that enable a visible and administratively legible form of participation while bracketing out contestation in local planning processes. In the findings, I map a set of mechanisms through which postpolitical dynamics are constituted in digital participation spaces: the scoping and control of dialogue through issue framing and standardized engagement formats; risk aversion and the sanitization of dissent via moderation and civility norms; and the performance of openness, where metrics and transparency substitute for genuine influence. Often, practitioners characterize these mechanisms as mundane, reasonable, and professional, revealing how postpolitical participation is stabilized in practice.

5.1 Participation, Platforms, and the Postpolitical

5.1.1 The Communicative-Agonistic Divide

Evolutions in planning theory and approaches to practice have long paralleled developments in theories of democracy (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). Through what Dryzek (2000) refers to as the "deliberative turn" (p. 1), deliberative democracy has become both the predominant framework in normative democratic theory (Talisse, 2017) and the "main game" in democratic practice (Curato et al., 2018, p. 2). Bohman (1998) defines deliberative democracy as "any one of a family of views according to which the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision-making and self-government" (p. 401). Deliberative democracy builds substantially from Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action and its procedural emphasis on the "forceless force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1999, p. 450). This deliberative turn was translated into planning through what Healey (1992) termed the "communicative turn" (p. 143), which asserts that through collaborative, consensus-based dialogue processes that incorporate different voices and emancipatory knowledge, planners can arrive at just solutions and best approximate the public interest (Forester, 1989; Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 1999). Communicative planning has gone on to inspire significant change in practice generally, its assumptions underpinning much of how participatory planning is both conceived and enacted (J. Carr, 2012; Legacy, 2023).

Shortly after deliberative frameworks began to gain purchase, important critiques emerged (Sanders, 1997), including from agonistic theorists who argued that conflict is constitutive of democracy rather than a failure of it (Mouffe, 1999). Echoing these debates, communicative planning faced early and vociferous criticism from scholars who questioned its treatment of power and its practical feasibility (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998). These critics explore how there is a concurrent and paradoxical empowerment and disempowerment of citizens during deliberative participation processes, wherein citizens are given a "voice," but their involvement serves to legitimate the process and an outcome that may only reflect existing power asymmetries (Koch, 2013). This participation theatre can give the false impression of empowerment while simply enabling the more efficient advancement of predetermined projects (Aylett, 2010). The deliberative requirement for everyone to "act democratically" can stifle dissent (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998, p. 1984), while choreographed participatory events provide cover for predetermined outcomes (Lederman, 2019). Many of these critiques coalesce into an agonistic response, which holds that suppressing conflict in pursuit of rational consensus obscures relations of power and displaces genuine political contestation (Mouffe, 2000).

The drive to eliminate conflict and dissensus in service of rational consensus can lead to a "postpolitical" condition. The term refers not to the end of politics but the displacement of political contestation by orderly procedure. Swyngedouw (2018) defines this as a "process by which consensual governance of contentious public affairs through the mobilization of techno-managerial dispositives sutures or colonizes the space of the political" (p. xv). Researchers have used this postpolitical framing to diagnose deficient participatory processes in planning case studies. This diagnosis leads many to advocate for a more agonistic planning remedy (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; McAuliffe & Rogers, 2018; Purcell, 2009) that foregrounds "strife" as "a productive force" (Pløger, 2004, p. 87) rather than a failure of communicative process.

The importance of this debate has led to the characterization of a divide in participatory planning theory, where "Habermasian communicative rationality and Mouffean agonistic pluralism come to the fore as two competing positions, creating a sharp communicative-agonistic divide" (Özdemir, 2019, p. 240). Although this characterization of a stark divide has itself been questioned, with various bridging attempts recognizing that the conflict and consensus lenses each have blind spots but also contributions (Bond, 2011; Legacy et al., 2019; Van Wymeersch et al., 2019),

deliberative and agonistic conceptions of democracy remain foundational pillars of participatory planning thought.

This planning debate, however, has remained anchored to a particular vintage of deliberative theory. Deliberative democracy itself has been substantially reshaped from within. The "systemic turn" moved deliberative theory's focus from structured forums like citizen assemblies into the broader public sphere, where activism and dissent are recognized as legitimate democratic action rather than as obstacles to consensus (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Subsequent work has explicitly engaged power and structural exclusion (Curato et al., 2018; Drake, 2021). Communicative planning has only partially absorbed these revisions, particularly the move beyond consensus orientation (Mäntysalo & Jarenko, 2014). Planning's communicative-agonistic debate is therefore partly an argument with an older version of deliberative theory and one that has become embedded in planning practice as well as its digital infrastructure.

5.1.2 The Postpolitical as Analytical Framework

While postpolitical theory has been critiqued for being too abstract and pessimistic (Beveridge & Koch, 2017; Özdemir & Tasan-Kok, 2019), planning scholars have demonstrated its value as an analytical frame for identifying the ways depoliticization is produced in practice (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Ruming, 2018) with identifiable features that can be empirically examined. Ruming (2018) treats the postpolitical not as a fixed condition but as an active and ongoing process through which state and market actors work to secure outcomes that serve their interests. This approach to postpolitics invites us to examine the mechanics through which postpolitical dynamics are produced and stabilized in practice.

When utilized as a tool for empirical research, the postpolitical frame identifies processes by which political questions are displaced by technical solutions and genuine alternatives are foreclosed. Swyngedouw (2009) describes this as forms of governmentality that have "replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountancy metrics and technocratic environmental management" (p. 604). In participatory contexts, this manifests through what Allmendinger and Haughton (2012) characterize as "carefully stage-managed processes with subtly but clearly defined parameters of what is open for debate" (p. 90). Consensus-based approaches, they continue, "may not be resolving difficult issues so much as masking them and displacing them to other arenas" (p. 100). In this way, certain

participation formats activate specific mechanisms to produce legitimacy while constraining the scope of engagement, managing disagreement through procedural choreography rather than genuinely engaging with conflicting claims.

Planning scholars have applied this diagnostic lens to trace these mechanisms in specific case studies (C. Carr & Hesse, 2020; Inch, 2012; Lederman, 2019; Ruming, 2018). These reveal how the political is displaced through identifiable mechanisms: political questions are reframed as technical ones, participatory processes are scoped to naturalize predetermined outcomes, opposition is diluted rather than engaged, and the apparatus of civic participation is appropriated to provide political cover. The mechanisms are observable in participatory events, planning systems, policy processes, and the institutional arrangements that structure participation. This choreography of public engagement increasingly happens through digital systems that structure what can be said, by whom, and in what formats. Yet the digital infrastructural dimension of participatory planning has received far less attention than face-to-face deliberation processes, even as engagement platforms have become widespread tools for hosting municipal public engagement.

5.1.3 Deliberative Goes Digital

When planning scholars have turned their attention to digital participation, they have largely done so in alignment with the communicative turn in planning theory. Evans-Cowley and Hollander's (2010) well-cited entrant into the collection of digital participatory planning literature exemplifies this trajectory and is redolent of many of the analyses that followed. They frame online participation as a potential remedy for the deficiencies of face-to-face engagement long recognized by deliberative democrats, writing that new technologies represent "an entirely new generation of forms and practices of public participation that promise to elevate the public discourse in an unprecedented manner while providing an interactive, networked environment for decision-making" (p. 397). The deliberative assumptions are embedded throughout, with participation oriented toward improving the quality of discourse. Digital tools are positioned as a potential remedy for "the face-to-face politics of difference and unequal power relations," (p. 397) with "the highest level of participation" framed as one in which citizens are "equally empowered and fully informed" such that decisions are "justifiable to each participant" (p. 399). The analysis presupposes that the goal of digital participation should be a more inclusive, accessible version of the communicative ideal, one that treats difference as something to remedy rather than as a democratic resource.

Much of the digital participatory planning scholarship that followed exhibits similar framing. Afzalan et al. (2017) explicitly state that participatory planning theories informed by communicative rationality should provide the normative insights to guide the selection and adoption of online participatory tools. Secinaro et al. (2021) evaluate whether platforms improve the participation of citizens without a critical examination of participation itself, focusing instead on platform operations, features, and the number of users. Hjerpe et al. (2018) probe the functionality of online participatory tools against deliberative benchmarks, while Hofmann et al. (2019) assess effectiveness in achieving participation goals framed entirely within communicative planning assumptions. Similarly, Gower et al. (2023) explicitly link "communicative planning theory with digital planning offering a communicative planning lens to the assessment of emerging digital engagement tools" (p. 664).

Even scholarship that pushes further in its critique of digital participation tends to stay within the communicative frame. Goodspeed (2016), for instance, critiques digital knowledge technologies as "black boxes" that can impose expert views over stakeholder perspectives. His proposed remedy is to reshape these technologies through critical interaction between technology creators and planning stakeholders. The goal, however, is to strengthen communicative rationality rather than to question deliberation as the normative standard. Robinson and Johnson's (2023) critical analysis evaluates "convener platforms" against Arnstein's (1969) ladder, Fung's (2006) democracy cube, and the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum (Michaelson et al., 2024), all frameworks rooted in deliberative assumptions. Their evaluation reveals that platform tools cluster around lower rungs of information provision and consultation, but the critique takes for granted the deliberative ideal those rungs are meant to measure. In both cases, the critique extends to how technologies are designed and used, not to the deliberative premises underlying them.

The pattern is consistent: online participatory tools and their capabilities are catalogued (Afzalan et al., 2017; Ertiö, 2015), functionality is probed (Hjerpe et al., 2018), transformative claims are tempered (Levenda et al., 2020; Sieber et al., 2016), and practical challenges are outlined (Robinson & DeRuyter, 2016), but the evaluative framework remains anchored in deliberative democratic theory. Even Pokharel et al. (2022), in examining how synchronous online tools can be used to "stifle dissent," still frame dissent as part of "healthy, deliberative democracy," (p. 127) rather than directly engaging theories that treat conflict as constitutive of democratic politics.

What is notably absent from this literature is a deeper engagement with the agonistic and postpolitical critiques that have become central to broader participatory planning theory. Very few articles focused on digital participatory planning make any mention of agonism or postpolitics, and despite their centrality to foundational debates in planning theory, digital participatory planning scholarship does not acknowledge the communicative-agonistic divide. This represents a significant theoretical gap. If deliberative and agonistic conceptions of democracy are foundational pillars of participatory planning thought, then digital participatory planning is building on only half the foundation. And as platforms become routine infrastructure for public participation, this theoretical lacuna becomes increasingly consequential.

5.1.4 Platforms as Participatory Infrastructure

As participation migrates onto the new digital infrastructure of platforms, it is being reassembled according to distinctive platform logics. What Robinson and Johnson (2023) label the "platformization of participation" reveals how participation is not simply being digitized; it is being channeled toward more limited, unitized, and transactional forms that privilege quantifiable inputs over deliberative exchange. Postpolitical theory offers an important analytical vocabulary to assess this phenomenon.

Poell et al. (2019) define platformization as the penetration of digital platform infrastructures, economic processes, and governance frameworks into different spheres of life, accompanied by the reorganization of cultural practices around these platforms. They identify three institutional dimensions: the development of data infrastructures that render practices into quantifiable data; the reorganization of economic relations around multi-sided markets; and the establishment of governance arrangements through interfaces, algorithms, and policies that structure how users can interact. A platform is constitutive; "a mediator rather than an intermediary" (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 29). The "affordances," or the features, defaults, and rules built into the system, "simultaneously allow and constrain expression" (Plantin et al., 2018, p. 298). They do not merely reflect social relations but actively produce the social structures we inhabit. In this way, platforms have, according to van Dijck et al. (2018), "penetrated the heart of societies" (p. 2).

Dedicated digital engagement platforms represent this process in participatory planning as a unified infrastructure increasingly central to how municipalities conduct public participation (Boyco, 2024). Through the platformization lens, DDEPs are revealed as an architecture that configures what

kinds of contributions are possible, how they can be expressed, and what becomes visible and actionable. The standardization, quantification, and manageability logics embedded in platform architecture align with and may amplify the techno-managerial displacement of politics that postpolitical scholars have identified in participatory governance. This alignment is not coincidental. As Koch (2013) argues, participatory devices are never installed in a political vacuum; they are structured according to existing patterns of power. State actors set up participatory devices to create collective engagement "at arm's length" while maintaining supervision through mechanisms that ensure "uniformity and comprehensibility" (p. 2979). As Koch continues, the very features that make a process appear more meaningful, transparent, and accessible can legitimate that process without disrupting distributive power asymmetries. Whether and how DDEPs operationalize this dynamic is an empirical question, but the alignment suggests they are not neutral tools for democratic engagement.

The remainder of this paper applies postpolitical analysis to the platformization of participation in local planning. Rather than evaluating whether DDEPs "work" according to the deliberative benchmarks that dominate existing scholarship (and the platforms' own marketing materials), the analysis examines how they structure what becomes possible, visible, and actionable within participatory processes. Through the Canadian case study, I trace specific mechanisms through which postpolitical dynamics are constituted through platform architecture and administrative practice.

5.2 Tracing Digital Postpolitics in Practice

The research questions guiding this study ask how DDEPs shape participatory processes and in what ways they might operate as postpolitical infrastructures. I take an interpretive approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) to explore how depoliticization is practically accomplished through platform architecture and administrative routine, foregrounding practitioners' own accounts of how they adopt, configure, govern, and make sense of digital participation. The empirical basis is a qualitative case study of DDEP governance across Canadian municipalities. I employed purposeful maximum variation sampling to identify information-rich cases (Patton, 2014), conducting 44 semi-structured interviews between October 2023 and February 2024 with planners, public engagement specialists, and communications professionals from 33 municipalities, alongside representatives from three leading platform vendors (Boyco, 2024). I have analyzed this same interview corpus elsewhere

through a four-part platformization framework focused on practitioners' adoption, administration, affordance, and assessment of these tools (Boyco, 2026); the present paper brings those accounts under postpolitical critique. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol organized around platform configuration decisions, moderation practices, and practitioners' assessments of digital participation quality.

I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), moving iteratively between practitioners' accounts and postpolitical theory. Descriptive coding captured explicit elements of platform governance; interpretive themes emerged through iterative coding and memo-writing without imposing theoretical categories at the outset. Through this process, three mechanism clusters emerged: the scoping and control of dialogue, the sanitization of dissent, and the performance of openness. This practitioner focus reflects the paper's interest in the constitution of postpolitical conditions through administrative practice. As Koch (2013) demonstrates, the production and implementation of participatory outcomes depend on distributive power residing in governments and bureaucracies. Practitioners are central to how participatory possibilities are shaped.

My professional background in municipal planning practice shaped both access and interpretation. Familiarity with engagement workflows facilitated rapport and enabled follow-up questions attuned to administrative realities, but it also required vigilance against treating practitioners' administrative rationales as neutral or inevitable. This meant remaining alert to how routine bureaucratic decisions about the scope of engagement, what counts as acceptable input, and keeping engagement process formats manageable can function as mechanisms that stabilize postpolitical conditions. The critical orientation of this analysis is not meant to imply practitioner culpability; the democratic suppression it identifies emerges in the routine use of platforms under resource-constrained administrative environments, not from individual intent. However, practitioners' framings of constraints as reasonable or inevitable should be read as data about how postpolitical logics are internalized and reproduced, not as complete accounts of how engagement functions for participants.

5.3 Three Mechanisms of Postpolitical Digital Infrastructure

This section puts postpolitical theory to work examining digital engagement in local planning. Drawing on interviews with 44 practitioners across Canadian municipalities, I demonstrate how DDEPs function as postpolitical infrastructures through three interconnected mechanisms: the

scoping and control of dialogue, the sanitization of dissent, and the performance of openness through metrics and transparency practices. For each mechanism, I present empirical patterns and consider their implications through this postpolitical framework. The findings reveal considerable variation in how municipalities adopt and administer DDEPs, shaped by organizational capacity, political culture, and individual practitioner orientations. Yet across this variation, patterned regularities emerge.

5.3.1 Scoping and Control: Issue Framing and Standardized Formats

The first mechanism through which DDEPs operate as postpolitical infrastructure involves the scoping and control of dialogue. Before any participant clicks a button or submits a response, consequential decisions have already been made about what is up for discussion, what tools will mediate that discussion, and what forms of input will count as valid. These are not neutral administrative choices but acts of framing that establish the terrain on which participation unfolds.

5.3.1.1 Gatekeeping What Goes On

Platform administrators within municipalities exercise considerable discretion over what projects appear on the engagement hub and how those projects are framed. This gatekeeping function operates at multiple levels: deciding which initiatives warrant public engagement, determining what aspects of those initiatives are open for input, and establishing the parameters within which feedback is solicited. One engagement manager described the platform's role as separating the projects the municipality had chosen to consult on from the wider range of issues participants might raise.

This boundary-setting work often operates implicitly through the framing of engagement projects themselves as they are defined on the platform. When a municipality launches a consultation on the implementation of a policy rather than its desirability, or when engagement focuses on design preferences rather than whether a project should proceed at all, the scope of legitimate debate has already been narrowed. One practitioner articulated the logic explicitly, favourably comparing the digital engagement environment to an in-person meeting where the dialogue cannot be so easily scoped: "If all we wanted to know was which bridge people preferred, we were not going to find that out in an in-person setting because the conversations would just go back to whether or not we were going to have the bridge—and that conversation was done." The online platform was chosen precisely because it could hold the line on what was open for discussion. This is not a failure of the platform

but its intended function: to channel input toward questions the municipality has deemed answerable while limiting debate on questions it considers settled.

The effect is to transmute political questions into technical ones. Debates about values, priorities, and competing visions of community futures are reframed as matters of feasibility, implementation, or preference aggregation. Participants are invited to weigh in on the details (which design option, what timeline, how to mitigate impacts) rather than to contest the underlying decisions that brought those options into being. As one municipal staff member observed, councillors may not "want to create space for the polarity or the plurality of perspectives on an issue, to have a conversation … because it actually makes their job harder to make a decision." The platform facilitates this avoidance by providing a structured apparatus for soliciting input that appears responsive while limiting debate on foundational questions.

5.3.1.2 Survey Dominance and the Logic of Standardization

Across the interviews, a consistent pattern emerged: despite the range of participatory mechanisms available on DDEPs, including forums, ideas boards, Q&A features, mapping tools, and deliberative polling, the use of simple survey tools overwhelmingly dominates actual practice. When asked what tools were most used, many practitioners gave near-identical responses. They consistently described surveys as their dominant tool, citing convenience and familiarity. In some cases, practitioners were unaware of the platform's broader capabilities: "I don't even know what other tools are available," stated one engagement practitioner.

The dominance of surveys is partly a matter of convenience and familiarity but also reflects a particular epistemology of participation. Surveys impose a structure that emphasizes data intake over dialogue and the aggregation of individual preferences over collective deliberation. They presume that the relevant questions can be known in advance, that response options can be predetermined, and that democratic input is best understood as the summation of discrete individual choices. Complex community concerns are reduced into analyzable data points. One practitioner articulated their platform's purpose explicitly: "It's not necessarily to create dialogue between community members, but to help local governments understand where public sentiment is at."

The standardization extends beyond surveys to the platform environment itself. Multiple practitioners cited "consistency" and "templates" as platform benefits, enabling uniform approaches across projects and departments. One regional coordinator described the platform's role in supporting

"a consistent approach and principles across the organization." A planner elsewhere described how his team had created a "template" within the platform to ensure consistency across projects. While standardization offers genuine administrative efficiencies, it also embeds assumptions about what participation should look like (Legacy et al., 2023). Surveys are characterized by their "closed" feedback structures like limited-response options, predetermined categories, and character-restricted comment fields. They emphasize efficiency and manageability over the open-ended, sometimes messy, deliberation that might surface unexpected concerns or challenge administrative framings.

5.3.1.3 Strategic Tool Limitation

The avoidance of deliberative tools is often strategic. Practitioners consistently described calibrating tool selection to planning project contentiousness, restricting open dialogue features on issues where debate might be most "volatile." "If you have a project that might have sort of polar views about something, you need to be super cautious of what tools you're going to use on the platform," explained one experienced administrator. Another described deliberately staying "away from those ones that are open ended [with the] ability to comment on stuff in favor of a more restrictive kind of ability."

This risk-calibrated approach to tool selection was pervasive. One platform administrator explained that most municipal units "prefer that closed system" because open tools allow "a really active participant group" to "sway the outcome of a project," adding that "on more controversial projects, most business units stay away" from open feedback tools. Because of this, in many instances, discussion forums and other features designed for dialogue sit idle in favour of surveys and polls. This approach is not only an emergent practice but a design feature. As one platform vendor explained, municipalities can "pick and choose what feedback tools are appropriate for your level of risk. … You don't necessarily have to use open feedback tools if you don't want to."

Several practitioners reflected critically on what limitations this pattern introduces. One engagement specialist observed that "it's difficult when something is so sanitized to have difficult discussions," recounting how her team ultimately decided against using a storytelling tool for a road safety project despite its potential value: "We decided not to go with that option. … And I think it's more of that we don't allow [difficult discussions] in the first place, by not using those tools for those contentious discussions. If you just go straight to a survey, people don't have to interact." Often, the platform's deliberative affordances remain dormant not because they do not work but because they

might work too well in engagement processes that are designed to manage contestation rather than surface it.

Beyond strategic risk aversion, practitioners cited limited organizational capacity as a barrier to deploying deliberative tools, which require ongoing moderation and facilitation that stretched available resources. One interviewee noted that dialogue features remain dormant by default: "We don't always have that feature turned on, simply because we're not resourced to do continual monitoring." Surveys and polls require minimal staff attention while forums and dialogue tools demand ongoing moderation, response, and facilitation. When resources are scarce, practitioners, often making responsible decisions in consideration of their capacity to manage engagement, consistently select extractive over deliberative modes. These decisions take shape within institutional priorities and political risk environments that frame what feels feasible.

The cumulative effect of gatekeeping, standardizing input formats, and limiting deliberative tools, whether by strategic choice or resource constraint, is to narrow the terrain of engagement before participation begins. The platform provides the infrastructure, but administrative practice shapes how that infrastructure is deployed. The result is a mode of engagement that can appear open and responsive while systematically channelling input away from foundational questions and toward manageable, predetermined categories. This pattern instantiates what participation scholars have identified more broadly: that participatory processes are often "restricted right from the start," involving "choosing between pre-developed policy alternatives or scenarios or developing solutions for predefined problems" rather than contesting how problems are framed in the first place (Turnhout et al., 2010, p. 26). What Moini (2017) terms the "technicalization" of participation—translating political questions into technical ones—enables authorities to "include rather than exclude, and consequently control, dissent…and sterilize conflict" (p. 136). The platform, in this reading, is not "failing" to enable deliberation. It is succeeding at making participation administrable, formulating what Ruming (2018) calls "consensually manageable problems" (p. 182) amenable to expert intermediation.

5.3.2 Sanitization of Dissent: Moderation and the Governance of Discourse

The second mechanism operates at the level of discourse itself. Where the first mechanism structures what can be discussed, this mechanism governs how discussion unfolds, transforming potentially contentious political expression into orderly, "respectful" input. Through moderation routines, civility

requirements, and control of the platform space, DDEPs enact the sanitization of dissent. Conflict is not so much resolved as filtered, managed, and defused before it can surface competing visions or challenge administrative framings.

5.3.2.1 Platforms as Controlled Alternatives: You're in "Our House" Now

Across interviews, practitioners positioned DDEPs as a corrective to social media. Where social media was characterized as chaotic, toxic, and ungovernable, engagement platforms were valued precisely for their controllability. "Twitter [now X] is a toilet of vitriol," observed one engagement manager. A regional coordinator described "the pure toxicity of online social media at the moment" as a reason to avoid them for municipal engagement, noting that "anytime we post something on social media, and you go down to the comments section … it's appalling." The engagement platform, by contrast, offered refuge from this perceived chaos.

This framing was articulated by one practitioner as an "our house" mentality. Describing how users behave differently on the engagement platform versus social media, she explained: "They see social media as sort of their own playground … their arena. And then when they hit [our platform], they've come into our house. And so, there's a little bit of, you know, a higher level of expectation … that behaviour, you know, even if we don't request that people sign in, they are a little bit more subdued, reserved, thoughtful." The spatial metaphor explains how the platform is considered municipal administration territory, governed by municipal norms, where visitors are expected to conduct themselves accordingly. This domestication of participatory space was consistently framed as beneficial. Practitioners noted that platform users are "more purposeful" than social media commenters, that "people remain quite civil. It wasn't like a Facebook comment section."

Yet our house, our rules logic also constrains what forms of expression are accepted. Practitioners also described the benefits of architectural control over the nature of exchange itself, in contrast to social media. As one official explained, the system is designed "to not get into that full … social media back and forth. … We can shut it down at any time." Platform appeal is less about enabling dialogue and more about ensuring that dialogue remains bounded and terminable at administrative discretion. The unruly, angry, or confrontational modes of expression that characterize social media are precisely what the platform is designed to exclude. What practitioners describe as "toxicity" includes not only harassment and abuse but also, potentially, the intensity that accompanies

high-stakes disagreement. When the municipality is host, it sets the terms of legitimate participation. The modes of expression that fall outside those terms become, by definition, out of bounds.

5.3.2.2 Civility Requirements and Moderation Practices: Censoring "Duckpants43"

The governance of discourse operates through both formal moderation and informal norms. Platforms offer moderation tools that allow administrators to review, edit, or remove contributions before or after they appear publicly. While explicit content removal was described as rare, the capacity for moderation shapes the participatory environment. One administrator described the moderation capacity as enabling a controlled space for respectful input: "We can, theoretically, create a safe space for people to either share their stories or to provide comments in a respectful manner."

The concept of "safe space" recurred across interviews, but its meaning was elastic. In some cases, it referred to protecting participants from harassment or abuse. In others, "safety" shaded into the management of discomfort more broadly. One practitioner described her approach to moderation through an imaginative test: "If I can see somebody pointing at me and snarling their face when they say the comment, that usually warrants some sort of redaction. Rarely do we pull the comment in completion, but sometimes I'll redact it to summarize the person's intent in a nicer way."

Several practitioners described removing participants or filtering contributions when engagement became heated. "People have had to be removed. And they're not happy about it," one administrator acknowledged. The application of "respect" as a gatekeeping criterion was made explicit, with administrators framing removal decisions in terms of participants' responsibility to consider the impact of their words on others.

Practitioner discussion about requiring user registration versus allowing anonymity added another layer to these governance practices. While some municipalities allow anonymous participation to lower barriers, others require registration precisely to enable accountability and, by extension, civility. "People can say all kinds of shit … on a web platform that they're not going to say when they're sitting across the table from the guy who runs the homeless shelter," observed one engagement manager, arguing that online participation "is not a replacement for in-person" where face-to-face dynamics moderate behaviour. Another practitioner was more pointed: online conversation may "inherently" create polarization because, "I'm hiding behind my keyboard, you know, 'duckpants43.' And, like, I can say whatever I want."

The cumulative effect is to privilege calm, measured, and constructive expression while delegitimizing anger, frustration, and confrontation. The latter can easily be coded as incivility rather than as valid political responses to felt injustice. Moderation policies and design choices gatekeep those voices, limiting what contributions are deemed acceptable.

5.3.2.3 Risk Aversion and the Management of Conflict: The "Fear Factor"

Underlying these moderation practices is an institutional orientation toward conflict as risk to be managed rather than a democratic resource. Practitioners were candid about fear as a driver of platform practice. "There's a fear factor, right?" acknowledged one engagement manager. "They're afraid of the online." Other practitioners described their municipalities as broadly risk-averse toward open dialogue tools, attributing survey dominance to institutional reluctance to open unmanaged conversation.

This risk aversion operates at multiple levels. At the organizational level, practitioners described leadership reluctance to deploy open dialogue tools despite practitioners' own efforts, driven by fear of public pushback. One practitioner located this fear in organizational culture, noting that "the community can be quite tough and demanding" and that senior leadership required ongoing work to "get them to buy in" to community engagement. At the individual level, practitioners described personal reluctance to engage with contentious topics: "It sometimes feels easier to separate those things," acknowledged an engagement specialist, citing "heightened emotions" and limited capacity as factors that discourage "taking on this extra tension."

The risk-averse orientation renders conflict as something to be prevented, diffused, or managed rather than surfaced and engaged. Several practitioners cited conflict diffusion as a platform benefit. One described how a focus on online engagement for a contentious secondary plan meant that "we don't have angry mobs at our Council meetings." Another noted that online-only engagement for a controversial bridge project surfaced support that "would have been shouted down" at in-person meetings, where "NIMBYs" might have "dominated."

In some ways, these outcomes can be read positively, as enabling quieter voices to be heard and preventing vocal minorities from monopolizing processes. But they also reveal an orientation that treats conflict itself as the problem rather than as a symptom of genuine disagreement about values, priorities, and futures. From an agonistic perspective, this orientation restrains conflict's "productive force" as "a catalyst of social and institutional change" (Kühn, 2021, p. 151). The goal of agonistic

planning is not to eliminate dissent but to make it "visible" and create arenas where competing visions can be contested (Pløger, 2004). But in the "our house" framing of the digital engagement space, municipal officials become the arbiters of legitimate expression. The metaphor also converts a participant's civic standing into guest status, with citizens entering as visitors whose welcome is conditional and whose conduct is subject to house rules set by the host. Civility requirements filter contributions through norms of respectability that, as Sanders (1997) argues, can "discredit on seemingly democratic grounds the views of those who are less likely to present their arguments in ways that we recognize as characteristically deliberative" (p. 349). And risk aversion forecloses the contentious exchanges that might surface competing visions or challenge administrative framings. In the resulting engagement environment, dissent becomes domesticated. Tamed digital dialogues are more orderly and more amenable to administrative control.

5.3.3 Performing Openness: Metrics, Transparency, and the Question of Influence

The third mechanism operates at the level of visibility and accountability. DDEPs generate an extensive apparatus of metrics, reporting functions, and transparency practices that make participation visible and legible to administrators, councils, and the public itself. While transparency is considered a democratic good, the findings suggest that the performance of openness can become decoupled from substantive influence, substituting the appearance of responsiveness for genuine power-sharing. Engagement platforms can create an illusion of genuine participation, where public feedback is gathered and displayed but does not meaningfully shape decisions.

5.3.3.1 Transparency as Information Provision

Practitioners emphasized information provision as a core platform function, describing the DDEP as a centralized repository for project details, background documents, and timelines, valued for its accessibility and educational value. One practitioner described the platform as enabling everything from "little chunks of data" to full council reports, allowing people to engage at different levels of depth.

For these practitioners, this information architecture represents a genuine improvement over fragmented municipal websites and ad hoc communication. They valued the platform's capacity to create "a living record" of engagement history, to maintain continuity across staff and council turnover, and to provide seasonal or dispersed residents with ongoing connection to municipal affairs.

For geographically spread rural municipalities, the ability to reach populations that "don't live here" full-time but "want to stay informed and connected" through digital newsletters was described as "really, really meaningful."

Yet information provision, while necessary, is not equivalent to democratic engagement. Several practitioners acknowledged the one-directional quality of platform use. "We're using it still quite a bit as a tool to communicate and keep people up to date," noted one planner, a formulation that positions the public as recipients of information rather than participants in deliberation. A communications officer was more pointed: "It looks good. It looks like we're engaged. We're not. You know, we're pumping information out. But that's a one-way channel." The platform's transparency mechanisms (publicly visible comments, displayed survey results, posted "what we heard" reports) are often presented as democratic goods, but they may act as substitutes for deeper engagement and shared decision-making.

5.3.3.2 Metrics as Proxies for Democratic Success

DDEPs generate extensive quantitative data, including page visits, unique visitors, survey completions, registered users, and newsletter open rates. This data becomes central to how practitioners assess and communicate engagement success. One platform administrator described receiving vendor-provided benchmarking reports comparing her municipality's registration numbers against peer communities: "We grow on average about 1,000 participants a year. And we're sitting at 14,000 participants right now. So, it's significant. And the benchmarking report says that we are the highest among peer municipalities." Another engagement manager described learning to focus on a platform metric that tracks unique visitors to project pages: "The 'Aware' number is the one that I care about. And that one just keeps going up. And so, I'm very happy with that. Like between June and November, we had 62,000 'Aware.'" Elsewhere, a communications officer reported that "our numbers are going up, up, up … by 30%, 50%, year by year."

These metrics serve important functions: they provide evidence of activity, justify platform expenditures, and offer comparative baselines. Municipal councillors in particular, practitioners reported, "seem to really cling to numbers" because "the numbers give them a sense of where the … more stable rocks are when you're crossing the creek." Another practitioner valued the platform's capacity to provide "hard evidence" for council reports: "Maybe it's not representative of the community … but there is a strong sentiment, a strong voice."

Yet several practitioners articulated concerns about metric fixation. One administrator cautioned against treating quantifiable outputs as democratic measures, noting that his team actively worked to prevent platform data from functioning as a plebiscite, recognizing that "one comment could be more powerful and meaningful to us than 100 that have a different position." Another practitioner observed that the platform "really lends itself to more of a project management approach to engagement, and not that other relationality; not so much the building those connections and connecting people to the democratic process."

The ease of quantification encourages fixation on measurable inputs (how many participated) rather than democratic outputs (whether participation influenced outcomes). Metrics tell practitioners that engagement occurred but nothing about whether it mattered. A focus on numbers also obscures whether the input represented substantive engagement that surfaced genuine contestation or merely aggregated preferences. A deeply divided community can be characterized as "62% supportive." This aggregation of divided opinion into summary statistics can produce what Smith (2017, p. 103) calls the "consensual elimination of conflict." Dissent does not disappear, but it is rendered less visible as it is absorbed into reporting metrics.

5.3.3.3 Participation Decoupled from Power: All Bun, No Hotdog

When asked directly whether platform engagement influenced decisions, practitioners often hesitated or acknowledged uncertainty. Many explained how digital input was systematically devalued relative to other forms of engagement. When asked about the impact that digital community engagement has had on local planning processes, one practitioner replied: "I don't know, is the truth." A planning manager in another community was candid that survey data carried limited weight in developing planning recommendations, which remained "guided primarily by planning principles."

Several practitioners described a hierarchy of participation weight in which digital input ranks below other forms. A city councillor articulated the dynamic candidly: "Ideally, they would all be fairly equal. But humans being humans … when someone writes us a letter, that is more impactful than when they answer a survey anonymously, because then we know who is providing this feedback. And when someone takes the time to come speak to us, that is way more." A planner in another municipality confirmed this pattern: "Council's often swayed by the people that turned out to council meetings. So, I think they put … more weight on, you know, these are the people that have come out to meetings to participate and have their say." When asked directly whether digital engagement data

is relatively easy for Council to ignore or discount, he replied: “Yeah, I think that would be accurate.” Another planner stated that input from the DDEP “doesn’t change what our end planning decision is. But it may give us some additional feedback.”

This devaluation of digital input creates a structural disconnection between platform participation and decision-making power. Municipalities actively encourage engagement through the platform and practitioners often expressed preference for digital input over contentious public meetings. Yet the participation these platforms generate counts less—not through explicit policy but through the informal weighting practices of decision-makers. The institution promotes a mode of participation that it then discounts. Even when engagement occurs and is made visible through platform metrics, it may remain decoupled from substantive influence.

Several practitioners recognized and named this dynamic. “I think that these platforms could be used very cynically … to look like you’re engaging, because you’ve got a website, but not actually doing anything,” observed one engagement manager. Another described the risk more vividly: “If you are just doing engagement, but it’s not connected back to input to your decision-making process … you’re serving a bun and calling it a hot dog.” A regional planner was blunter still: “Sometimes these engagements are just being done because we need to do it. Because we know … probably what the decision is going to be at the end of the day, but you need to … give them an opportunity to say it. So that if anybody challenges you after [a] decision is made, at least you can say, well, we gave people the opportunity.”

Treating engagement as procedural cover represents the performative substitution dynamic at its clearest. The platform provides the infrastructure for participation, metrics demonstrate that participation occurred, and practitioners described developing “what we heard” reports that “close the loop” by displaying responsiveness. But the connection between this visible apparatus and actual decision outcomes remains uncertain and, in some cases, explicitly discounted. Digital engagement becomes what Swyngedouw (2018, p. 23) terms “impotent participation,” part of a choreography of participation that, as Lederman (2019, p. 87) observes, “insulates decision-making from truly democratic debate.”

5.4 The Platformization of Postpolitics: Hard-Coding Democratic Deficits

This paper has examined how Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms shape participatory planning across Canadian municipalities. Through interviews with practitioners, I have traced how platform

architecture and administrative practices narrow the terms of participation while sustaining the appearance of democratic responsiveness. This occurs through three interconnected mechanisms. Issue framing narrows the terrain of legitimate debate; moderation and civility norms filter the forms of expression permitted on that narrowed terrain; and metrics and transparency practices render the resulting managed participation visible and administratively legible, generating evidence that engagement occurred without requiring evidence that it mattered. Taken together, these mechanisms constitute an integrated apparatus of managed participation that I describe as the platformization of postpolitics: the process by which the logics embedded in digital engagement platforms align with and accelerate the depoliticizing tendencies that postpolitical scholars have identified in participatory governance. Platformization describes how digital infrastructures reorganize social practices around platform logics. In participatory planning this reorganization renders engagement administrable. Rather than resolving the recognized deficiencies of communicative approaches to planning, platforms hard-code them into a digital infrastructure characterized by the logics of order and manageability.

These findings address a gap in digital participatory planning scholarship, which has largely sailed past the foundational communicative-agonistic debates that structure contemporary planning theory. By anchoring evaluation of digital engagement to deliberative benchmarks, this literature has catalogued platform capabilities and limitations, but without fully interrogating the participatory model that those platforms instantiate. Postpolitical theory reveals how platforms might perform well by communicative measures while systematically stifling the contestation that agonistic scholars identify as constitutive of democracy. The dynamics explored here are not intentional acts of suppression; they are the routine expressions of digitalized engagement best practices and the replication of a deliberative antipattern through platform infrastructure. And this is not a condemnation of the practitioners interviewed for this study, as many are acutely aware of this tension in digital engagement. They administer participation under real constraints, including limited staff capacity, political risk aversion, and the palpable public anger that often accompanies contentious planning decisions. These workplace conditions make the order and manageability that platforms promise genuinely appealing. The platformization of postpolitics offers a vocabulary for the dynamics these practitioners intuit and for more deeply critiquing the platformization of participation phenomenon.

The practitioner accounts examined here capture how DDEPs are governed and rationalized by those responsible for their administration. They do not, however, fully capture how digital input is weighed in decision-making or how members of the public experience platform participation. And the concentrated commercial vendor market that drives the growing institutional offer of digital participation also warrants further scrutiny. Future research might complement my practitioner and mechanism-focused analysis by exploring participant experiences or by tracing specific participatory inputs through to planning decision outcomes, testing whether the postpolitical dynamics identified here produce the foreclosure effects the theory predicts. But the practitioner accounts examined here already reveal how the postpolitical apparatus is recognized and contested.

The postpolitical vocabulary equips practitioners to recognize what is at stake in the routine administrative choices that configure digital participation. In many ways, software is eating participatory planning. The evidence examined here shows how defaulting to extractive engagement tools, scoping and narrowing what is debatable, filtering the intensity that accompanies genuine disagreement, and using metrics as evidence of actual influence are not peripheral implementation failures but part of the organizing logics of platforms that have become routine infrastructure for democratic participation. Yet the platformization of postpolitics is not an inevitability. Platform configurations are, as Leszczynski (2020) argues, "highly contingent, indeterminate, and necessarily incomplete" (p. 201) and the interviews themselves surfaced moments where practitioners pushed against the logics this paper has identified. If, as Smith (2017) contends, digital spaces can be arranged in ways that make them more or less political, then how DDEPs are configured is a political question, not a technical one. By rendering the platformization of postpolitics visible, we can hope to challenge its effects.

Chapter 6
Conclusions

This dissertation set out to characterize, explore, and critically scrutinize the use of Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms in Canadian municipal planning. That purpose emerged from a concern, grounded in my own professional planning experience, with the underexamined political consequences of a rapidly expanding digital participatory practice. As DDEPs became routine infrastructure for public participation across the country, the critical theoretical lenses that had enriched our understanding of participatory planning more broadly had not been brought to bear on these digital tools. Across three papers, this work has traced that gap from the empirical description of platform adoption, through the practitioner experience of administering digital engagement, to a theoretical diagnosis of what these platforms are actually doing within participatory planning and how we might understand their effects through the full range of theoretical resources available.

The research has been guided by Flyvbjerg's phronetic planning research and its four value-rational questions: where are we going with planning, who gains and who loses and by which mechanisms of power, is this development desirable, and what should we do about it (Flyvbjerg, 2004, p. 290). These questions structured the intellectual logic of the dissertation and mapped onto the progression of its three papers. It began with documenting the landscape, then surfacing the mechanisms of power embedded in platform governance and finally rendering a judgment about whether the conditions those mechanisms produce are desirable. This concluding chapter synthesizes the findings across that arc, outlines the dissertation's contributions, acknowledges the boundaries of the research, identifies directions for future inquiry, and offers a closing reflection on what this work means for the democratic promise of participatory planning in an increasingly digital era.

6.1 Synthesis of Findings

The three papers that comprise the heart of this dissertation were designed to build on one another: from mapping the empirical landscape, to examining practitioner experience, to developing a theoretical diagnosis. As outlined in Chapter 2, the intellectual logic of this progression follows Flyvbjerg's four value-rational questions, each of which asks something different of the evidence. The three research questions posed in Chapter 1 are addressed through this phronetic structure. Paper 1's characterization of DDEPs responds to "where are we going"; Papers 2 and 3's examination of

practitioner experience and platform governance responds to “who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power”; and the questions of desirability and what should be done draw on findings across all three. Taken together, the manuscripts move from establishing what is happening, through an examination of power, toward a judgment about desirability and a consideration of what should be done. What follows revisits the dissertation’s findings through this structure, with an emphasis on what the three papers establish collectively that none establishes alone.

Where are we going? Paper 1 answered this question by documenting a development that had not previously been characterized in planning scholarship. The term "Dedicated Digital Engagement Platforms" did not exist in the literature before this research; Paper 1 defined and named this distinct category of civic technology, distinguishing DDEPs from social media, general website builders, and other digital participatory tools in order to bring into focus a platform type that had proliferated largely without scholarly recognition. Through a scan of 839 Canadian local and regional municipalities, Paper 1 established that DDEPs have become a mainstream component of contemporary local planning. Over 30% of the jurisdictions surveyed had adopted one of these platforms, and a majority of Canadians now live within a local or regional government that uses a DDEP to mediate digital participation in planning and other municipal decision-making processes. At the time of the scan, the municipal market was overwhelmingly consolidated around a single commercial provider, Granicus, which accounted for over 82% of documented platform users. (Notably, and anecdotally, this degree of consolidation appears to be shifting in recent months, as more municipalities move to adopt Social Pinpoint [recently renamed Open Point], Granicus’s main competitor in Canada, and new platforms such as Go Vocal enter the Canadian market. The broader pattern, however, remains: municipal digital participation continues to be mediated through a small number of commercial DDEP providers.) DDEPs have become the default digital infrastructure for public participation at the local level in Canada (“table stakes,” as one local engagement manager described it), and online participation across much of the country is now assembled inside standardized, commercially developed software environments built, marketed, and maintained by a small number of for-profit companies that are headquartered outside the country. The empirical baseline Paper 1 provided set the justification for the dissertation's critical focus, but it also framed the stakes: where we are going with participatory planning, in its digital dimension, is toward an increasing reliance on commercial platform infrastructure whose embedded logics and democratic implications had received little scholarly scrutiny.

Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? Papers 2 and 3 together answered this question by moving inside the platforms Paper 1 had documented, surfacing the mechanisms through which power operates in digitally mediated participation. Paper 2 examined how DDEPs are governed in practice. Through the four-part platformization framework developed for that analysis—adoption, administration, affordances, and assessment—it revealed a pattern in which platform uptake outpaces the organizational capacity and institutional readiness required to deploy these tools meaningfully. Adoption was frequently driven by peer influence and vendor marketing rather than strategic evaluation of democratic need. Administration was constrained by limited staffing, knowledge gaps, and a risk-averse institutional culture that led practitioners to keep the platforms' more deliberative features switched off. Platform affordances, while enabling structured interactions, simultaneously narrowed the possibilities for open dialogue by channelling input through more one-way and extractive formats like surveys and polls. And practitioner assessment of platform performance relied on participation metrics—page views, unique visitors, completed surveys—that measured reach without capturing depth, quality, or influence. The cumulative picture Paper 2 drew was of a widening gap between what DDEPs promise, what their adoption signals to the public, and what municipalities do with them. This produces what one interviewee characterized as a handwaving of participatory process: a digital gesture toward engagement that signals openness while constraining the scope of public input and sidelining deeper democratic involvement.

Paper 3 reinterpreted these practitioner accounts through a postpolitical lens, moving from description to diagnosis. Where Paper 2 identified practical patterns, Paper 3 asked what those patterns constitute when read against the theoretical architecture of postpolitical critique. The analysis traced three interconnected mechanisms through which DDEPs produce postpolitical conditions in participatory planning. The first, the scoping and control of dialogue, structures the terms of engagement: administrators decide what projects appear on the platform and how engagement opportunities are framed, while standardized input formats and the strategic limitation of deliberative tools channel participation toward manageable, predetermined categories. The second, the sanitization of dissent, governs the conditions under which public expression is permitted. Municipalities channel engagement away from social media and onto a platform where, as one practitioner put it, participants have "come into our house." In that controlled space, moderation routines, civility requirements, and an institutional orientation toward conflict as risk filter contestation out of participation and transform political disagreement into orderly, "respectful" input. The third, the performance of openness,

operates at the level of accountability and influence: metrics, transparency reports, and "what we heard" summaries generate evidence that engagement occurred without requiring evidence that it mattered, while practitioners themselves acknowledged that digital input is routinely devalued relative to other forms of participation. Across these mechanisms, practitioners characterized their choices as mundane, reasonable, and professional. They certainly were not the result of any deliberate suppression of deeper democratic engagement. Rather, the postpolitical conditions these choices produce are stabilized through the everyday administrative logic of making engagement manageable. These arrangements tend to serve the institutions and decision-makers who gain procedural legitimacy and political cover from a visible apparatus of participation, and to insulate status quo planning outcomes from substantive challenge. What is diminished is the capacity for publics to contest how problems are framed, to surface competing visions, and to exert genuine influence over the decisions that affect them.

Is this desirable? The evidence assembled across this dissertation points toward a judgment on desirability. The three mechanisms examined in Paper 3 constitute an integrated apparatus of managed participation. Issue framing narrows what can be discussed and in what terms; moderation and civility norms filter the forms of expression that are permitted; metrics and transparency practices generate evidence that engagement occurred without requiring evidence that it mattered. Together, they produce what I have described as the platformization of postpolitics: the process by which the logics embedded in digital engagement platforms align with and accelerate the depoliticizing tendencies that postpolitical scholars have identified in participatory governance. Rather than resolving the recognized deficiencies of communicative approaches to planning, DDEPs hard-code them into a digital infrastructure characterized by the logics of order and manageability. Platforms can perform well by communicative measures. Ostensibly, they broaden inclusion, lower barriers to participation, make engagement processes transparent and accessible, and provide structured opportunities for public input. But what the postpolitical critique points toward, and my interviews with practitioners revealed, is that platforms can systematically foreclose the contestation that agonistic scholars identify as constitutive of democratic politics. Practitioners who administer these systems often recognize this tension, and in some cases named it candidly, but that does not resolve it. They work under real constraints: limited capacity, political risk aversion, and the palpable public anger that accompanies contentious planning decisions. These conditions make the order and manageability that platforms promise genuinely appealing. But the cumulative effect is a form of

participation that sustains the appearance of democratic responsiveness while bracketing out the political substance that gives participation its democratic purpose.

What should we do about it? The fourth phronetic question is addressed in Papers 2 and 3 at different levels. Paper 2 responded at the level of practice, offering recommendations for practitioners on intentional platform selection, building the administrative capacity required for meaningful deployment, and developing evaluative criteria that measure democratic quality rather than participation volume. Paper 3 responded at the level of theory and institutional orientation, arguing that planning scholarship must bring the communicative-agonistic debates to bear on digital engagement research and that the postpolitical conditions this dissertation has documented are produced through identifiable mechanisms and are therefore contestable.

The contingency of these conditions points toward what can be done. Platform configurations are, as Leszczynski (2020) argues, "highly contingent, indeterminate, and necessarily incomplete" (p. 201). The postpolitical dynamics generated by platform logics traced through this dissertation are not inevitable. They are the product of a commercialized digital engagement ecosystem and specific administrative choices, institutional orientations, and design decisions that could be made differently. Leszczynski's concept of the "glitch"—the moments where platform configurations fail to execute as anticipated or produce openings for unexpected manoeuvre—is a useful reminder that the logics of order and manageability embedded in DDEPs do not eliminate all possibility of contestation. The interviews themselves surfaced moments where practitioners pushed against the very logics Paper 3 identified, and agonistic theory insists that the foreclosure of the political always generates its own return (Mouffe, 2005). The question is whether that return takes the form of destructive antagonism displaced to other arenas or productive contestation within participatory processes themselves.

How DDEPs are configured is a political question and not strictly a technical one. The practitioners who make those configuration decisions have agency to contest the postpolitical conditions this dissertation has documented. But the possibility extends beyond practitioner choices. As Smith (2017) argues, digital spaces can be arranged in ways that make them more or less political, and the internet offers the capacity "to open up conflictual spaces that simply cannot exist offline" (p. 125). Smith contends that "politics might be reinvigorated and transformed into something more participatory and agonistic by placing it online" (p. 123). DDEPs as currently configured work against that possibility, but the configuration choices and institutional arrangements that produce

postpolitical conditions are not permanent or inevitable. Perhaps it is not inevitable that these platforms only extend the democratic deficits of deliberative consensus-oriented process or postpolitical managerialism. We can begin to ask whether they could be configured as spaces for a deeper and more genuinely agonistic form of democratic engagement.

Taken together, the three papers establish a cumulative argument. Paper 1 documented the rapid and consolidated adoption of DDEPs as routine participatory infrastructure. Paper 2 showed how that infrastructure is governed in practice under conditions of constrained capacity, risk aversion, and shallow deployment. Paper 3 diagnosed the postpolitical conditions those governance patterns produce and identified the mechanisms through which they operate. DDEPs are active constituents of postpolitical conditions in participatory planning. Their embedded logics of order, standardization, manageability, and metrics align with and accelerate the depoliticizing tendencies that critical scholars have long identified in consensus-oriented participatory governance. The question this dissertation raises is whether the model of participation these platforms instantiate serves democratic purposes, and how substantive that participation is. The digital turn in participatory planning, as it has unfolded in Canadian municipalities, has encoded the recognized deficiencies of communicative approaches into the default architecture of digital participation.

6.2 Contributions

6.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

The central theoretical contribution of this dissertation is the concept of DDEPs as postpolitical infrastructures. Postpolitical theory has been applied productively to participatory planning case studies by scholars tracing how depoliticization is produced in specific governance contexts (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Lederman, 2019; Ruming, 2018). This dissertation extends that diagnostic tradition to the digital infrastructures that increasingly mediate participatory planning. The argument is that DDEPs do more than simply host participation online; they actively constitute the conditions under which participation takes place. My contention is that those conditions align with and accelerate the depoliticizing tendencies that postpolitical scholars have identified in consensus-oriented participatory governance. The concept is grounded empirically through the three mechanisms traced in Paper 3 that emerged from the interviews: the scoping and control of dialogue, the sanitization of dissent, and the performance of openness. These demonstrate how the postpolitical

condition in digital engagement is produced through specific, identifiable dynamics in platform architecture and administrative practice.

A related theoretical contribution is the concept I describe as the platformization of postpolitics, which names the broader process underlying the diagnosis above. The platformization of postpolitics describes how DDEPs come to function as postpolitical infrastructure. Platformization scholarship, particularly the work of Poell et al. (2019) and van Dijck et al. (2018), has developed a sharp analytical vocabulary for how commercial digital platforms penetrate social and institutional life, reorganizing practices around logics of standardization, quantification, and manageability. Postpolitical critique, drawing on Swyngedouw (2009, 2018), Mouffe (1999, 2005), and others, has identified how consensus-oriented governance displaces genuine political contestation. These two bodies of scholarship have rarely been brought into direct conversation in planning research, and this dissertation connects them systematically. The platformization of postpolitics captures the process by which platform logics reorganize participatory practice in ways that render engagement administrable, legible, and visible while bracketing dissent, sustaining the appearance of democratic responsiveness, and leaving existing power relations uncontested. As a conceptual framework, it is applicable beyond the specific case of DDEPs examined here—other platform technologies entering participatory governance, including emerging AI tools, could be examined through the same lens.

The four-part platformization framework developed in Paper 2—adoption, administration, affordances, and assessment—offers a complementary conceptual contribution. The framework emerged from the interview data and was refined through iterative engagement with platformization scholarship and critical participatory planning theory. It organized the analysis in Paper 2 and provided the empirical scaffolding on which Paper 3's postpolitical diagnosis was built. As an analytical lens, it is transferable. The four dimensions capture dynamics that are relevant to any platform technology being adopted by planners and local governments, including emerging AI-based tools. Researchers examining digital participatory technologies in other jurisdictions or other institutional contexts could apply the framework to structure their own analyses of how platforms are selected, governed, deployed, and evaluated.

Another contribution is the identification and naming of the deliberative antipattern in digital participatory planning scholarship. Coined originally as a term in software design, an antipattern describes a common response to a recurring problem that appears effective but generates further

problems of its own (Koenig, 1998). Digital participatory planning scholarship has largely replicated this pattern by focusing on institutional and cultural barriers to consensus-oriented participation and searching for tools and techniques to overcome them, while treating deliberative-style democracy as the unquestioned endpoint. As I argued in Paper 1 and developed through Paper 3, the communicative-agonistic debates are constitutive of participatory planning theory, yet digital participatory planning scholarship has built on only one side of that foundation. The deliberative antipattern names this systematic omission: the risk that digital engagement research and practice replicates and accelerates the recognized limitations of communicative planning by failing to interrogate the participatory model that digital platforms instantiate. As Kohn (2000) warned, "placing deliberation at the center of political theory has certain effects which must be interrogated" (p. 426). Digital participatory planning scholarship can do more to contribute to that interrogation.

Finally, the dissertation advances a contingency argument. The postpolitical conditions documented across this research are produced through identifiable mechanisms and specific configuration choices. They are stabilized through everyday administrative practice, institutional risk aversion, and the embedded logics of commercial software products. Because these conditions are produced rather than given, they are also contestable. As Kühn (2021) states, "the value of agonistic theories of planning lies in disputing the alleged lack of alternatives in post-democracy and in showing that alternatives are indeed available" (p. 154). The postpolitical work developed here—postpolitical infrastructures, the platformization of postpolitics, the deliberative antipattern—is intended to make these dynamics visible so that they can be recognized and contested by scholars and practitioners alike. The contribution is diagnostic, but it is also oriented toward possibility: toward what digital participatory planning could look like if its platforms and the practices surrounding them were configured as spaces for productive agonistic engagement rather than managed consensus.

6.2.2 Empirical Contributions

This dissertation provides the first comprehensive empirical account of DDEP adoption at the national level in Canada. Prior to this research, no study had systematically documented the extent to which local and regional governments across the country had adopted this class of platform, which platforms were in use, or how concentrated the market had become. The scan of 839 municipalities reported in Paper 1 established that baseline, revealing that over 30% of surveyed jurisdictions had adopted a DDEP and that a single commercial provider accounted for over 82% of documented users.

This empirical foundation made visible a development that had been unfolding rapidly in practice but had gone largely uncharted in planning scholarship, and it provided the evidentiary justification for the critical inquiry that followed in Papers 2 and 3.

The 44-interview dataset constitutes a broad account of practitioner experience with digital engagement platforms. Spanning 33 municipalities across Canadian regions and encompassing planners, engagement specialists, communications professionals, elected officials, and consultants, it captures a range of institutional settings, government structures, and levels of platform maturity. The deliberate inclusion of three representatives from leading DDEP vendors—Granicus, Social Pinpoint, and PlaceSpeak—surfaced the commercial and design logics that municipalities inherit when they adopt a platform. Together, the national scan and the interview dataset ground the dissertation's theoretical arguments in the administrative realities of how DDEPs are procured, configured, and governed across the country.

The dissertation also contributes to the typological definition of DDEPs itself. "Dedicated Digital Engagement Platform" is a term I coined to capture the unique nature of these purpose-built systems. By defining and distinguishing DDEPs from social media, general website builders, and other online participatory technologies, Paper 1 brought into focus a platform type that had proliferated across local government without a name or a dedicated scholarly treatment. That definitional work was a precondition for the empirical investigation that followed: documenting the national landscape of DDEP adoption, tracing common patterns of governance across municipalities, and identifying the market consolidation that makes these platforms a consequential object of study all depended on first recognizing DDEPs as a distinct category of participatory technology.

6.2.3 Methodological Contributions

This dissertation applies Flyvbjerg's phronetic planning research to digital participatory infrastructure, demonstrating that the value-rational questions—where are we going, who gains and who loses, is this desirable, what should we do—can be productively brought to bear on the platforms that increasingly mediate public participation in planning. The approach proved well suited to the object of study. The value-rational questions provided a structure for moving from empirical documentation through practitioner experience to a critical judgment about desirability. And the phronetic commitment to context-dependent, power-attentive inquiry resisted the typical evaluative approach in digital participatory planning scholarship of measuring platforms against the deliberative

benchmarks they themselves invoke. The methodology bridged the communicative-agonistic debates that are foundational to participatory planning theory with an empirical examination of how those debates play out in the design and administration of digital participatory platforms.

The national scan methodology is also replicable. The approach—systematically profiling every local and regional municipality above a population threshold for platform adoption using public web searches, supplementary tools, and structured database construction—produced a comprehensive empirical baseline from a set of publicly accessible sources. The same methodology could be applied to document DDEP or other platform adoption in other countries where similar municipal structures and publicly visible engagement hubs exist.

6.2.4 Practical Contributions

The concepts developed across this dissertation are intended to be of use to practitioners as well as scholars. The ideas of postpolitical infrastructures, the deliberative antipattern, and the platformization of postpolitics offer planners and engagement professionals a language for recognizing what is at stake in the routine administrative choices that configure digital participation. When a practitioner decides which projects to put on the platform, which tools to activate, how to moderate public input, or what metrics to report, those decisions carry democratic consequences. By naming those consequences, I hope to open pathways for critical self-examination in participatory practice. Practitioners who understand the tool they are administering as a postpolitical infrastructure rather than a neutral engagement channel are better positioned to recognize when their configuration choices are narrowing the scope of public input, filtering out contestation, or generating the appearance of responsiveness without substantive influence.

Paper 2 offered a set of practitioner-facing recommendations grounded in the interview findings: critically assessing whether a platform aligns with engagement needs before committing to its use; building the administrative capacity required for meaningful deployment rather than leaving deliberative features dormant; focusing on deep assimilation of the technology rather than adoption alone; integrating DDEPs into wider engagement strategies that include in-person methods rather than treating digital platforms as a substitute for relationship-building; and developing evaluative criteria that measure democratic quality rather than participation volume. Paper 3's theoretical diagnosis deepens these recommendations by explaining why they matter. The assimilation gap, risk-averse tool selection, the predilection for survey tools, and the fixation on quantitative participation metrics that

Paper 2 documented are characterized in Paper 3 as mechanisms through which postpolitical conditions are constituted and stabilized. This understanding shifts the conversation from how to use platforms more effectively to how to govern them more critically, with an awareness of how platform logics can work against the democratic purposes they are meant to serve.

The emphasis throughout this dissertation falls on practitioner agency. Platform design matters, and the commercial logics embedded in DDEP architecture shape the conditions of participation in consequential ways. But it is the planners and engagement professionals who administer these platforms, design the wider engagement strategies within which platforms sit, and make the configuration decisions through which postpolitical conditions are produced or contested. As Koch (2013) demonstrates, participatory outcomes depend on the distributive power residing in governments and their administrative staff. The practitioners interviewed for this research exercise that power daily, and many do so with a critical awareness of the tensions involved. The practical contribution of this dissertation is to equip them with a vocabulary and a framework for acting on that awareness. Absent intentional design and ongoing critical attention, mere adoption of a digital engagement platform can devolve into a performative handwaving of participatory process. With more intentionality, practitioners have the capacity to push against the platformization of postpolitics through how they scope engagement, what tools they deploy, how they govern discourse, and how they connect platform participation to actual decision-making power.

6.3 Directions for Future Research

The practical constraints on the claims this research can make are discussed in detail in Section 2.5. Rather than restating those in full, this section focuses on limitations that the research process itself revealed and on the directions for future inquiry they open up.

The most consequential boundary is the practitioner-side focus. This dissertation captures how DDEPs are governed and rationalized by those responsible for their administration. It does not capture how members of the public experience platform-mediated engagement or whether they perceive the postpolitical dynamics identified here. Practitioners' framings of platform strengths and limitations should not be read as complete descriptions of how engagement actually functions for participants. Research examining the public-side experience of DDEP-mediated participation, including how platform design affects the quality and substance of public contributions and how community members respond when engagement feels managed or constrained, remains an essential

and underexplored dimension of this field. Such work would provide the complementary vantage point needed to test whether the postpolitical dynamics this dissertation has identified from the administrative side produce the limiting effects the theory predicts on the participant side.

The geographic and linguistic scope of the research also bounds the claims. The empirical grounding is exclusively Canadian, and the practitioner perspectives in Papers 2 and 3 are drawn only from those practitioners' interviews, notably all of whom represent English-language municipal contexts. The Quebec DDEP landscape, with its distinct regulatory environment, linguistic specificity, and different platform ecology (including Quebec-specific platforms such as Cocoriko, V+, and Pando identified in Paper 1), remains outside the interpretive reach of this research. The same DDEP software products documented here are deployed internationally, and comparative work examining how the same platforms operate within different institutional, regulatory, and political contexts would be a productive extension, testing whether the postpolitical dynamics documented in Canadian municipalities are generalizable or context specific. The Phase 1 national database also captures DDEP adoption as it stood between March and September 2023. Vendor consolidation, ongoing platform development, new entrants to the market, and new adoptions have continued since. The empirical landscape documented in Paper 1 should be understood as a snapshot of a rapidly evolving environment.

Several directions for future research follow from these limitations and from the findings themselves. Participant-side studies, as noted above, would complement the practitioner-focused analysis developed here. Longitudinal research tracing specific participatory processes and inputs through to planning decision outcomes would address questions this dissertation raises but does not answer, such as the actual postpolitical outcomes DDEPs produce. Case studies that explore what happens when agonistic principles are embedded in digital engagement platforms and processes would test whether the postpolitical tendencies explored in this dissertation can be practically reversed. And comparative international research, examining how the same platforms are governed in different jurisdictions, would clarify how much of what this dissertation has found is attributable to platform architecture and how much to the institutional cultures and administrative practices of Canadian municipalities.

Finally, the rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence into participatory planning processes warrants attention through the critical lens this dissertation has developed. AI is already

being used to summarize public input, draft engagement materials, and generate responses to citizen comments (Robinson & Johnson, 2023). These applications carry forward the logics of efficiency, standardization, and manageability that characterize the platformization of postpolitics, at accelerated scale and with reduced human intermediation. If DDEPs hard-code existing democratic deficits into platform infrastructure, generative AI risks automating them. The appeal of AI for practitioners operating under the capacity constraints I have documented here is obvious. But its efficiency, effortlessness, and instantaneity are also the qualities that could intensify the postpolitical dynamics described, including further displacing contestation with managed, sanitized, and algorithmically optimized participation. The postpolitical infrastructures, deliberative antipattern, and the platformization of postpolitics explored in this dissertation also provide analytical tools for examining whether AI-mediated engagement replicates the democratic deficiencies of dominant approaches to participatory planning, but at a scale and speed that outpaces any other technology incorporated into planning thus far. This is among the most urgent extensions of the research program this dissertation has begun.

6.4 Final Reflections

"there is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening"

—The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 25).

This dissertation and my overall PhD journey began from my own practice. For over a decade before this research, I worked as a planner and community engagement consultant helping municipalities adopt and implement DDEPs and related digital tools. I was among the first practitioners to help local municipalities in Canada adopt some of these platforms and from those early days I appreciated what they offered. I believed then, and I still believe, that they can be a part of good participatory practice, especially when they are deployed with intentionality and consideration of community needs, attunement to their unintended consequences, and critical awareness of what they can and cannot do. The postpolitical dynamics this dissertation traces are ones I recognize from my own work. Although I didn't have that vocabulary at the time, sensing those tensions in my own practice is what brought me to this research. It is research I undertook with great empathy for the engagement practitioner. I have felt the appeal of platforms that make engagement more manageable and efficient. In my own

project work I have made the sort of routine administrative choices I have examined here around scoping, control, moderation, and the use of metrics under the same pressures and constraints the practitioners I interviewed described. So, this research is not meant to be a condemnation of their work or mine. It is an attempt to think about our work more deeply, to make visible the implications of some of the routine choices practitioners make every day when using platforms, and to give those practitioners a foundation to recognize and contest those dynamics.

The fear and discomfort that drive risk aversion in participatory practice, and how that translates to platform governance, are real and entirely understandable, particularly in an era of increased hostility, disinformation, and digitally accelerated conspiracy theories making their way from behind the keyboard into town halls and in-person community engagement processes. The institutional pressures, the capacity constraints, and the attraction of technology solutions that overlay a feeling and image of control, manageability, and efficiency onto the messiness of democratic participation are all real. And as a consultant, I know well the particular version of this pressure to have a process that *looks* successful and inclusive while keeping everything on-time and within-budget. Agonistic engagement—inviting more contention, slowing things down, bringing in dissenting voices—reads as an engagement "gone off the rails" by most metrics consultants are measured by. It is a hard sell to say to a client, "I think we should try to find and invite more controversy in this process."

What this research has changed for me is how I see those choices. I am now much more attuned to leading with engagement objectives rather than the tool as a starting point. I question the digital-by-default mode of engagement and ask whether a digital tool is the best place to position limited resources or if in-person or other methodologies would better serve the engagement objectives and needs of the community. I think differently about how success is measured—whether a "smooth" process or high volume of anonymous input are the right metrics, or whether those might even indicate a problematic engagement process. I have come to think about my job as less about reducing friction and more about finding productive ways to channel it. I do not look at platforms as neutral containers for engagement anymore. I think about how they shape participation itself and, importantly, how they shape the practitioners who use them; how they shape what practitioners do, where they expend their energies, and what they see as their role and function. The platform, with its orderly project management architecture, structures engagement in the mind of the practitioner as a

"project" to be administered. Practice becomes shaped by the platform. The platform programs the practitioner.

Many of the practitioners I interviewed already sensed the tensions this dissertation names. They recognized that the platform made engagement easier but not necessarily better, that numbers were going up but influence was uncertain, that the tool was sometimes being used for procedural cover. What concerns me most is that even those who see the problem face institutional headwinds, capacity constraints, and implicit or explicit encouragement to fit their process into a digitally enabled, tightly scoped, and controlled engagement. The incentive structures all point in that direction, and municipalities have already committed real budget to annual platform licenses. And the economic incentive is for platform companies to produce products that overlay a feeling of control, manageability, and efficiency. Now that it is possible to do this transparent-seeming but highly controlled online engagement, who is positioned to make the case to invite more friction and dissent, to slow things down? This was always a challenge in participatory planning. The postpolitical analysis has long identified it. But the commercial platforms that have been developed to meet the professional needs and challenges planners face have deepened that challenge and contribute to the participatory tensions that critical theorists have identified for us.

The rapid integration of AI into participatory planning extends and intensifies every one of these dynamics. As Pamela Robinson and I have written about elsewhere (Boyco & Robinson, 2025), practitioners are already experimenting with AI tools to draft engagement plans, summarize public input, assist with real-time dialogue, and analyze large volumes of participation data. The efficiency, speed, and sense of control these tools offer are genuinely appealing to planning professionals whose time, analytical capacity, and emotional energy are under strain. But in participatory planning, as we argued in that work, friction is not failure. Friction—the essential and challenging process of navigating diverse perspectives, disagreements, and power dynamics inherent in collective decision-making—is where understanding happens, where power is negotiated, and where trust is built. The risk is that AI automates that friction away. If DDEPs hard-code existing democratic deficits into platform infrastructure, generative AI risks automating them at a scale and speed that outpaces the critical scrutiny needed to assess the consequences. The willingness to hand over communicative planning functions to automation and algorithmically derived analysis may reveal something uncomfortable about how much participatory process already functions as participation theatre—a choreography that creates a glidepath for the advancement of powerful interests, status quo planning,

or predetermined outcomes. Our profession may be on what Robinson and I have described as a slippery slope of synthetic democracy (Boyco & Robinson, 2025), which requires us to think actively and carefully about if, when, and how we use these tools in our work.

I am no less likely to use or recommend DDEPs as a result of this research. This remains, as I stated at the outset, not an anti-technology project. But I come equipped with a different set of questions, considerations, and recognitions. I am more wary of the commercialization of participation through digital engagement platforms, how efforts within the container of the platform are shaped by the platform itself, and of how energies poured into that platform could be directed elsewhere—toward face-to-face relationship and trust building that we are not doing because we are spending time configuring platforms or parsing high volumes of anonymous feedback.

Naming the challenge is a first step, and I believe it is an important one. Practitioners often do not have the time or space for the kind of lengthy critical reflection this research undertakes, and I am genuinely grateful to have had this opportunity to reflect as a professional. Presenting these dynamics back to fellow practitioners and looking critically at my own practice is meant to make underlying assumptions visible and therefore contestable. The phronetic commitment at the centre of this dissertation is oriented precisely toward that kind of visibility: bringing power and values to the surface so they can be recognized, debated, and acted upon. DDEPs are built to make participation feel frictionless; as Sadowski (2020, p. 169) contends, adding a bit of "grit" to systems built to be frictionless is good practice. My theory and inquiry are meant to add that grit. Individually, the ideas and theory around radical and agonistic planning open up some agency for planners to find where they can exert their power within their institutional realities, even in some small ways. Collectively, there may be opportunities to influence the platforms themselves—the specifications they are designed to, the problems they are built to solve.

I hope that our profession can bring its collective voice and its foundational ethical commitments and professional standards more directly into the technology development space. Planners should be a part of shaping these tools rather than being simply recipients of them, shaped by technologies without a say in how those technologies shape us. As a profession, we are well positioned to be a bridge between digital civic engagement technologies and the communities we work in, to make technology work for our communities' contexts and concerns. This is especially urgent as AI accelerates the dynamics this dissertation has identified. We—planners and public

alike—should resist being passive recipients of technology developed by the most powerful corporations the world has ever known. Our profession needs an active voice, and we need to be working alongside and on behalf of the communities we serve, and the public interest mandate planners are professionally dedicated to. Technology will not solve or absolve us from the tensions inherent in participatory planning. The contribution of this dissertation is in making visible the dynamics that those tensions produce when they are assembled inside commercial platform infrastructure—so that they can be contested by the practitioners and communities who have the most at stake.

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Appendix A
Sample Interview Guide

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Question Guide: Municipal Staff

Title of Study: Digital Participation: Resolving or Hard-coding Communicative Planning's Democratic Deficits?

Student Investigator: Morgan Boyco, PhD Student, School of Planning, University of Waterloo
Email: mwboyco@uwaterloo.ca.

Opening

1. Tell me about your position at X municipality.
2. How does your work relate to community engagement?
3. How are you involved with your municipality's online community engagement efforts?

Platform Choice

4. Your community uses X online engagement platform. Let's talk about its history.
   - When did your municipality adopt the platform?
   - Do you know why this specific platform was adopted? What was the process? What factors influenced the decision to choose this platform?
5. What's been your interaction with the platform? What's your own history with it?

Platform Use

6. What sorts of projects go on to the platform? Who decides?
7. Who is responsible for planning online engagement using the platform? Who manages implementation?
8. Does your municipality take full advantage of all the tools and features of the platform?
9. How is social media used for engagement in your community? How would you compare social media and your engagement platform?
10. How do you track who is participating online?

Platform Impact

11. Can you share any specific examples or experiences where the platform successfully supported a community engagement effort?
12. Are there experiences where it fell short?
13. When using the platform, what are you trying to achieve? What are your goals?
14. How does the platform handle debate and disagreement? How is it used in contentious decision-making processes?
15. How would you describe the overall effectiveness of the platform?
16. Is the platform affecting decision-making and planning outcomes?
17. Now that you are using this platform, do you find that you are still researching or experimenting with other digital tools for public participation?

Appendix B
Research Ethics Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Notification of Ethics Clearance to Conduct Research with Human Participants

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Principal Investigator: Janice Barry

Student investigator: Morgan Boyco

Co-Principal Investigator: John Lewis

File #: 45513

Title: Digital Participation: Resolving or Hard-coding Communicative Planning's Democratic Deficits?

The Human Research Ethics Board is pleased to inform you this study has been reviewed and given ethics clearance.

Initial Approval Date: 08/15/23 (m/d/y)

University of Waterloo Research Ethics Boards are composed in accordance with, and carry out their functions and operate in a manner consistent with, the institution's guidelines for research with human participants, the Tri-Council Policy Statement for the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2 2022), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA), and all laws and regulations of the province of Ontario (as applicable). Additionally, CREB operates in a manner consistent with the International Conference for Harmonization of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use (ICH) Guidance E6(R2): Good Clinical Practice , the International Organization for Standardization of Good Clinical Practices (GCP) as set out by ISO 14155 - Clinical investigation of medical devices for human subjects, Part C, Division 5 of the Food and Drug Regulations, Part 4 of the Natural Health Products Regulations, Part 3 of the Medical Devices Regulations. Both Boards are registered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the Federal Wide Assurance, FWA00021410, and IRB registration number IRB00002419 (HREB) and IRB00007409 (CREB).

Expiry Date: 08/16/24 (m/d/y)

Multi-year research must be renewed at least once every 12 months unless a more frequent review has otherwise been specified. Studies will only be renewed if the renewal report is received and approved before the expiry date. Failure to submit renewal reports will result in the investigators being notified ethics clearance has been suspended and Research Finance being notified the ethics clearance is no longer valid.

Level of review: Delegated Review

Signed on behalf of the Human Research Ethics Board



Karen Pieters, Manager, Research Ethics, karen.pieters@uwaterloo.ca, 519-888-4567, ext. 41495

This above named study is to be conducted in accordance with the submitted application and the most recently approved versions of all supporting materials.

Documents reviewed and received ethics clearance for use in the study and/or received for information:

file: EmailScript_version2_20230810.pdf

file: PreliminaryInterviewSchedule_version1_20230620.pdf

file: InformationConsentForm_version2_20230810.pdf

file: InformationConsentLetter_version2_20230810.pdf

file: VerbalConsentForm_version1_20230810.pdf

file: AppreciationEmailScript_version2_20230810.pdf

Approved Protocol Version 3 in Research Ethics System

This is an official document. Retain for your files.

You are responsible for obtaining any additional institutional approvals that might be required to complete this study.

Appendix C
Interview Information Letter

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Information Letter – Interviews

Title of Study: Digital Participation: Resolving or Hard-coding Communicative Planning's Democratic Deficits?

Student Investigator: Morgan Boyco, PhD Student, School of Planning, University ofWaterloo
Email: mwboyco@uwaterloo.ca

Faculty Supervisors: Janice Barry, Associate Professor, School of Planning, University of Waterloo (janice.barry@uwaterloo.ca); John Lewis, Associate Professor, School of Planning, University of Waterloo (j7lewis@uwaterloo.ca).

To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, this letter will explain what the research study is about, the possible risks and benefits, and your rights as a research participant. If you do not understand something in the letter, please ask the investigator prior to consenting to the research study.

What is this study about?
You are invited to participate in a research study examining the use of purpose-built digital engagement platforms for public participation in local planning processes across Canada. With the proliferation of the use of these dedicated platforms at the municipal level, this research will explore the impacts of these technologies for local planning and public involvement in decision-making. The study is part of Morgan Boyco's PhD studies and ongoing dissertation research at the University of Waterloo's School of Planning.

I. Your role as the participant

What does participation involve?
Participation in the study will consist of one one-on-one interview, held in-person (if convenient), over the phone or video chat, that is expected to take 45 to 60 minutes. The interview will ask questions about your role within your municipality and your experience and perceptions of digital community engagement.

With your consent, interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure an accurate transcript of the interview. Recording is not a requirement, however, if you wish to participate but not be recorded. Recordings would only be accessible by the researcher.

Who may participate in the study?

To be involved in this study you must be at least 18 years of age and have some knowledge and/or experience with the digital participatory platform in question.

II. Your rights as a participant

Is participation in the study voluntary?
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question(s) you prefer not to answer by requesting to skip the question. Further, you may decide to end the interview at any time by advising the researcher of your decision.

Will you receive anything for participating in the study?
You will not receive payment/reimbursement for involvement in the study. If you wish to know the results of the study, you can leave your email (which will not be associated with your responses) and any publications of findings will be shared with you.

What are the possible benefits of the study?
Participation in this study may not provide any personal benefit to you, but it might provide the opportunity for you to critically reflect on your own work and/or involvement in your community's local decision-making processes. Your participation will also contribute to a better understanding of and, hopefully, improved practice of participatory planning and digital community engagement.

What are the risks associated with this study?
There are some risks associated with online data collection. If you choose to conduct the interview via online video chat (MS Teams or Zoom), please note that whenever information is transmitted over the internet privacy cannot be guaranteed. MS Teams and Zoom have implemented technical, administrative, and physical safeguards to protect the information provided via the Services from loss, misuse, and unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, or destruction. However, no Internet transmission is ever fully secure or error free. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g., government agencies, hackers). University of Waterloo researchers will not collect or use internet protocol (IP) addresses or other information which could link your participation to your computer or electronic device without first informing you.

Will your information be kept confidential?
Your participation will be considered strictly confidential, unless you explicitly indicate your desire to have all or some portion of your interview attributed to you. By default, identifying information will be removed from the data that is collected and stored separately. Your name will not appear in any paper or publication resulting from this study, however with your permission, quotations may be used with reference to your role (e.g., "Community Planner in Edmonton"). Please be aware that due to the focus of the study and the specialized expertise held by some participants, it is possible that others may be able to discern your involvement in the study by recognizing comments made by you in study results, even with the use of anonymous quotations. Collected data will be securely stored for a minimum of seven years on a secure University of Waterloo file storage drive only by the student investigator (Office 365 protected with Duo 2FA). A secondary copy will be kept on a password-protected external hard drive that is kept in a locked cabinet, in a locked office.



Interview transcripts will be shared with you following the interview and prior to any data interpretation and analysis. At that point, you may decide to allow some, or all your transcript attributed to you by name in any research results publications. This will be at your total discretion. Participants will have the right to withdraw from the study after they have received a copy of their interview transcript and have been given two months to review its contents. Any time before the close of that two-month review period, participants will have the right to fully withdraw from the study or strike any comments they no longer want to include.

If a participant withdraws from the study their data will be destroyed. Any individual comments a participant withdraws within the review time period would also be removed from the transcript and destroyed.

It is not possible to remove your data or change your anonymity status once study results have been submitted for publication.

III. Questions, Comments or Concerns

Who is sponsoring/funding this study?
This work is funded in part by a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Doctoral Fellowship and is part of a dissertation research project for the student investigator's PhD studies.

Has this study received ethics clearance?
This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #45513). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca.

Who should you contact if you have questions about your participation in this study?
If you have any question regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about your participation, please contact Morgan Boyco at mwboyco@uwaterloo.ca. You may also reach out to Morgan's faculty supervisors, Dr. Janice Barry, at janice.barry@uwaterloo.ca or Dr. John Lewis, at j7lewis@uwaterloo.ca with any questions.

Appendix D

Sample Interview Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Consent Form
By providing your consent, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

Please note that consent can be documented verbally at the beginning of the interview. The researcher will record your responses to the questions below at the beginning of the interview.

Title of the Study: Digital Participation: Resolving or Hard-coding Communicative Planning's Democratic Deficits?

I have read the information presented in the information letter about the study being conducted by Morgan Boyco, School of Planning, University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and have received satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details. I was informed that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can withdraw this consent by informing the researcher.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #45513). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca. For all other questions contact Morgan Boyco at mwboyco@uwaterloo.ca.

Yes ☐	No ☐	I agree of my own free will to participate in the study.
Yes ☐	No ☐	I consent to this interview being recorded. Checking No does not disqualify you from participation.
Yes ☐	No ☐	I give permission for the use of anonymous quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this study. I understand that I will be referenced generally by my role (e.g., "Community Planner in Edmonton")
Yes ☐	No ☐	I give permission for the use of attributed quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this study (I understand that my name and position would be attached to any quotations used in publications resulting from this study). Note that this permission can be withdrawn in whole or in part at any time within the two-month review period of the interview transcript.
Yes ☐	No ☐	I would like to know the results of the study.

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

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Appendix E

Code System

Code	Description
1 engagement within the municipality	**How community engagement practice is structured and guided at the municipality**
1.1 engagement culture	Engagement culture within the municipality
1.2 engagement staff structure	The structure or organization of engagement staff at the municipality
1.2.1 centralized	Engagement is centralized at the municipality. One central team oversees, advises on engagement across departments.
1.2.2 decentralized	Engagement specialists sit within each department
1.2.3 no formal engagement team	There isn't any dedicated person or team for community engagement. It might be diffuse or just default to corporate communications.
1.3 IAP2	Reference to or influence of IAP2 in the municipality
1.4 planners and engagement	Comments on professional planners and engagement within the municipality
2 platform adoption	**The process through which the platform was adopted, ie. RFP, direct assign, etc. and the influences/drivers for the choice**
2.1 looking for the silver bullet	Platforms are adopted in hopes of an engagement "silver bullet"
2.2 competitive bid	Formal RFP process
2.3 direct award	Platform contract was awarded directly
2.4 influence of other municipalities	How other municipalities have influenced platform adoption decisions.
2.5 innovation imperative	The need to seem "innovative" as a motivator for adopting a platform
2.6 marketing	Platform adoption was influenced by strong sales pitch from vendor, marketing
2.7 no other options	Platform was adopted because there were few or no other viable options at the time
2.8 policy recommendation	Platform was recommended through some kind of internal policy process

Code	Description
2.9 price notes	Platform was price competitive, other notes on price
2.10 started with project	Platform was originally brought on for one project and expanded from there
3 platform admin	**How the platform is administered, setup**
3.1 admin by communications	Comms department/staff mostly administers the platform
3.2 admin centralized	Platform is centrally administered by individual or group, although certain admin privileges may be extended
3.3 admin decentralized	Platform management is diffuse, decentralized somewhat, multiple admins allowed
3.4 consultants involvement	Platform administration done by consultants
3.5 contract notes	Details about contract, licensing, fees
3.6 hub model	Platform is used as a hub, with lower-tier municipalities sitting under an upper-tier
3.7 participation rates	Comments on participation volume, rates (not registration)
3.8 registration	Do they require registration for participation or allow anonymous participation?
3.8.1 mix of registration	Mix of anonymous and registration required
3.8.2 no or optional registration	Do not require registration and allow for anonymous participation
3.8.3 number of registered participants	Notes on number of registered participants, change over time
3.8.4 require registration	Require registration for participation and why
3.9 relation to municipal website	Solutions, questions, challenges of how platform relates to municipal website, problem of where to store info, repeated info
3.10 what goes on	Which projects get put on the engagement platform, why
3.10.1 expansive	A relatively expansive approach to what goes on the platform, including projects that may not have an engagement component (information/Q+A only, events pages, etc.)

Code	Description
3.10.2 important projects	Important, consequential projects go on the platform
3.10.3 must have engagement	Projects added to the platform must have an engagement component. Not just presenting information.
3.10.4 planning and development applications	Site has a space for many/all planning and development applications
4 use of features	**Which platform features are used?**
4.1 mapping tool	Use of Places or spatial tools
4.2 primarily surveys	Municipality primarily uses the survey tool
4.3 Q+A tool	Use of the Q&A function
4.4 use a mix or all	Municipality uses a good mix or all of the tools the platform offers
5 platform goals, impacts, benefits	**Goals and objectives for platform use, perceived or hoped-for benefits. How the platform has impacted decision making and planning outcomes.**
5.1 accessibility improvements, benefits	Platform makes process more accessible
5.2 advantage over city website	Platform advantages over the municipal website
5.3 benefits of no registration, anonymity	Allowing anonymous participation encourages more participation, confidentiality enables people to open up
5.4 benefits of registration	How requiring registration ensures people don't game the system, lets you know where people are located. Other benefits including keeping in touch with people.
5.5 builds trust	Platform use builds trust in the community
5.6 centralized, continuous, all in one place	Offer one window to all engagement, all project info in one place, centralizes engagement data, always-on, continuous place for engagement. One-stop-shop. Continuity of information (always available).
5.7 complement other strategies	Platform is used to complement other engagement strategies, such as in-person
5.8 cover your bases	Platform tools and availability of information helps cover your bases; it's available, even if it's not used

Code	Description
5.9 COVID	Impact of COVID on platform adoption or use
5.10 data privacy benefits	Location of servers
5.11 ease of use (external), reduce barriers	Make it easier for people to participate, convenience
5.12 ease of use, nimble (internal)	Platform is easy to use, even for non-technical people. It's quick and easy to share information, conduct engagement
5.13 empower community	Platform gives people a voice
5.14 enables dialogue	Platform enables two-way dialogue and information exchange
5.15 expands and diversifies participation	Helps capture people who wouldn't otherwise engage, provides engagement opportunity where there was none before, better than nothing
5.15.1 increases youth participation	Platform helps facilitate participation of younger demographic
5.16 expands what's engaged on	Use of the platform has allowed for an expansion of what is engaged on
5.17 for the highly engaged	Platform is helpful for people/interest groups who are highly engaged
5.18 higher response rates	Platform improves participation numbers
5.19 impact on decision making	The platform's impact on decisions, either has an impact, not making an impact, or unknown/difficult to know. The platform impact on Council decisions.
5.20 legitimacy, official channel	Platform seen as a legitimate, formal, official place for engagement
5.21 looks good, more visual	Aesthetic benefits of the site, make things look good, more visual
5.22 modernization	Platform part of modernization, digitalization, demonstrating a modern approach
5.23 more data, reporting functions	Platform provides more data, and more detailed data. Also participant data, such as EHQ's Informed, Aware, etc. metrics.
5.24 multiple tools	Platform offers multiple tools in one software

Code	Description
5.25 online expectations	Public and/or Council is expecting municipal information and engagement to be easily available online. Meeting people where they're at (which is online).
5.26 positive community feedback	Municipality has received positive feedback from community members about the platform or some aspect
5.27 provide information, transparency	Provide high quality information about projects, makes project and process transparent
5.28 provides a template, consistency	Platform offers a template for engagement, a consistent approach to engagement
5.29 purpose-built for engagement	Benefits of a platform purpose-built for engagement
5.30 quicker process, efficiency	Allows for quicker more efficient engagement process, faster feedback
5.31 spatial data	Platform mapping tool provides helpful spatial data
5.32 tech support, customer service	The value of platform technical support and good customer service
5.33 temperature check, see trends	Platform allows you to get a sense of trends, "temperature check", triangulate
5.34 thoughtful, informed engagement	Tool allows for more thoughtful, informed engagement, not as reactionary
5.35 value for money, cost	Platform provides overall value, cost-effectiveness, low cost
5.36 variety of perspectives	Platform has allowed gathering of more perspectives
6 platform problems, limitations	**Issues with the platform itself or how it is administered within the municipality. Also limitations of the platform.**
6.1 accessibility problems	Platform accessibility problems or limitations
6.2 anonymity problems	The anonymity provided by a web platform can degrade the process or dialogue
6.3 data or response overload	Platform generates so much data and/or responses that it can be difficult to manage it all
6.4 digital divides	Problems accessing or navigating the platform because of connectivity or ability limitations

Code	Description
6.5 doesn't build trust	Hard to build trust through a digital tool
6.6 eggs in one basket	Concern about municipality being over reliant on a platform that could disappear, having many municipalities locked into one tool
6.7 engagement fatigue, information overload	Lots of engagement opportunities on platform contributing to engagement fatigue, low levels of participation overall because there are so many opportunities. So much information can be overwhelming
6.8 illegitimate participation	People submitting multiple responses under different names, gaming the survey or other tools
6.9 insufficient resources, capacity constraints	Platform does not have sufficient municipal staff resources to take full advantage or run it well. Also concerns that platform takes too many resources.
6.10 insufficient training or guidelines	Not enough training or guidelines within the municipality to take full advantage of the platform or use it properly
6.11 integration challenges	Hard to integrate digital with in-person, challenge to make all engagement tools work cohesively
6.12 limited alternatives	Lack of alternative platforms in the market, domination by one or two platforms
6.13 low impact, digital participation valued less	Platform has negligible impact on decision-making. Feedback via platform is valued less than in-person feedback, Council presentations, or targeted emails and letters.
6.14 low participation numbers	Hard to get participation, low numbers
6.15 low quality, shallow participation	Participation is low quality and/or shallow
6.16 not managed well	Platform not managed or administered well within the municipality
6.17 not reaching everyone, equity concerns	The platform won't be able to reach all kinds of participants, not helping achieve equity
6.18 not reaching target	Hard to reach targeted communities through platform, specific demographics or geographies
6.19 not scientific, validity, selection bias	Platform does not provide statistically significant quantitative data (not necessarily a weakness, just recognized)

Code	Description
6.20 one size doesn't fit all	A single dedicated platform can't meet all needs, not always the most appropriate tool
6.21 overkill	Platform offers way more features than needed, sophisticated tool that is not being fully taken advantage of
6.22 platform functionality, support complaints	Poor platform experience. Especially complaints since Granicus bought EHQ, noted differences in customer service, rate of bug fixes or software updates, price complaints, etc. Other functionality complaints.
6.22.1 EHQ survey problem	Dissatisfaction with EHQ survey tool
6.22.2 switching or comparing to alternatives	Talk about switching from EHQ to Social Pinpoint, comparisons to Social Pinpoint or others, launching a review
6.23 platform unfamiliar	Platform is not widely known about within staff, Council, or the public, or unfamiliarity of how to use it well
6.24 platforms oversell abilities	The platform companies oversell what the platform can do or achieve
6.25 price barriers, complaints	Complaints about cost
6.26 privacy concerns	Concerns surrounding privacy and the platforms
6.27 raises expectations	Opening up online raises expectations of how much of a say community members can actually have
6.28 registration as a barrier	That registration can be a barrier to participation or, inversely, that allowing anonymous feedback increases participation rates
6.29 sucks up resources, becomes default	Cost and administration of the platform takes resources that could be dedicated to other channels. Platform is used largely because that's what they have, becomes the default
6.30 vanity metrics	Data platform provides worsens the lure of vanity metrics, a focus on numbers rather than good engagement
7 social media	**References to social media**
7.1 alternative to social media	Platform is a better alternative to social media
7.2 feedback gathered	Dialogue and feedback on social media used for a process

Code	Description
7.3 feedback not gathered	Social media feedback is not formally gathered, monitored, or part of the engagement process
8 managing conflict and process	**How the platform is used to manage conflict or contentious processes, deliberation, how it helps bracket the process**
8.1 primarily online	Much of the engagement efforts happen online, formerly in-person now happening digitally
8.2 no engagement = no interest	Assertions that if there is little engagement with a project, the public must not be interested or they must be happy with things
8.3 anonymity for protection	Anonymity enables more open dialogue
8.4 civility, respectful dialogue, moderation	How the platform, or limiting the openness on the platform, keeps dialogue respectful, calm, orderly. Moderation features. Or lack of civility on the platform, concerns about toxicity. Using platform moderation capabilities to manage conflict.
8.5 diffuses conflict	Platform use diffuses conflict, lessens tension
8.6 expose to other perspectives	Public platform exposes participants to diverse perspectives
8.7 illusion of participation, check-box	The platform helps give the illusion of participation and openness, but may not actually improve participation and transparency. Platform promotes check-box approach to engagement.
8.8 limiting tools	Limiting or carefully selecting what platform tools are used on contentious projects
8.9 make municipality more accountable	The platform ensures municipality is kept more accountable to participants
8.10 make participants more accountable	Platform requires people to slow down, be thoughtful, be accountable for their comments
8.11 not used for deliberation	Platform is not used for deliberative process, does not act as a deliberative democracy tool, does not foster two-way dialogue
8.12 provide an outlet	Platform offers an outlet, pressure release valve
8.13 provide information, dispel misinformation	Providing participants with information/good information/high quality information to mitigate contentious issues

Code	Description
8.14 risk management, aversion, fear	Platforms for risk management. Culture of risk aversion at the municipality, not wanting to open up the dialogue. Fears about expanding the process and opening up more using online tools; also fear of toxicity online
8.15 scoping and controlling	Putting boundaries about what's in scope for a dialogue, bracketing the conversation, controlling the dialogue
8.16 understand concerns	Platform helps understand what the concerns are, what people are going to be upset about, so it can be addressed.
9 best practices	**Good tips and best practices for platform use and also engagement in general, digital or not, how it all fits together well**
9.1 access to staff, more personal	Improves access to staff, "who's listening"
9.2 ask a question tool	Use of the Q+A tool
9.3 augment and support in-person	Data gathered through platform shapes in-person engagement, helps refine approach
9.4 can't replace in-person	On how a digital platform can't fully replace in-person engagement
9.5 circle back, close the loop	Importance of reporting back, what we heard
9.6 digital lens or digital first	Always bringing the digital lens to engagement planning (also referred to as "digital first" or "digital plus")
9.7 direct traffic from social media	Using social media to drive traffic and participation on the platform
9.8 engagement pipeline	Platform part of the engagement pipeline
9.9 engagement policy, consistency	Engagement approach guided by policy, consistent approach
9.10 forum tool dialogue	Use of forum tools to have more of a two-way dialogue
9.11 it's only a tool	The platform is only a tool, tool/technology won't do the job for you
9.12 marketing, promotion, awareness	Importance of marketing and promoting the platform, building awareness of digital engagement opportunities

Code	Description
9.13 newsletters	Use of newsletters to encourage more participation, communicate
9.14 one tool of many	Platform is just one tool in the toolbox, must be part of a diverse strategy
9.15 ongoing resident panel, ideas tool	Platform as an ongoing citizen panel; using the Ideas tool continually
9.16 optional registration	The benefits of offering both registration as well as anonymous participation
9.17 platform in-person	Bringing the platform to in-person events for engagement, to encourage registration, teach people how to use
9.18 privacy, data management practices	Best practices for protecting privacy, data
9.19 provide quality information	Platform can provide quality information, dispel rumours and counter disinformation
9.20 reducing barriers	Focus on reducing barriers to engagement, high quality user experience
9.21 registration best practice	Good recommendations, experiences for how to handle registration (or no registration)
9.22 spread out, coordinate engagement	Spread out engagement opportunities, good coordination, don't overwhelm people, managing engagement fatigue
9.23 using the right tool	Picking the right tools for objectives and project needs
9.24 utilizing data	Generating and using good data to guide engagement approach and outcomes
10 platform companies	**Codes from interviews with platform company representatives**
10.1 barriers to adoption	Factors that slowed adoption, made selling challenging
10.2 cost	Notes on platform subscription costs
10.3 engagement a unique market	Community engagement products and services make up a unique market, not like other IT services
10.4 explaining adoption, meeting needs	What factors led to adoption, why platforms found fertile ground; what needs the platforms meet
10.5 Granicus	Notes on Granicus, impact of EHQ sale to Granicus

Code	Description
10.6 IAP2 synergies	Relationship between platforms and IAP2
10.7 innovation, what's next	What's needed or coming in terms of platform evolution and innovation
10.8 market growth, sales	How and why the platform market grew, impact of sales
10.9 motivations	What motivates the platform developer and its employees
10.10 platform and service limitations	Where the platform falls short, limitations and deficiencies, customer service shortcomings
10.11 platform history	Notes on the history of platform development and spread
10.12 privacy	How platforms deal with privacy, other notes on privacy
10.13 switching, social pinpoint competition	On switching to social pinpoint, competition between EHQ and social pinpoint
10.14 value to clients	What value the platform has provided to clients.