

Neighbourhood and Digital Networking – Social Media as an Instrument of Neighbourhood Formation

The importance of virtual networking is increasingly reflected in people's neighbourly relationships. In addition to public and private spaces, the internet offers new social spaces in which a wide variety of people can network and exchange information. The Austrian Institute for Regional Studies (ÖIR GmbH) analysed the spectrum of virtual neighbourhood platforms and their influence on the real coexistence of people living in Vienna for the City of Vienna in the study "The Digital Bassena – Social Media as an Instrument of Neighbourhood Formation". In addition to a comprehensive analysis of the situation in Vienna and the German-speaking neighbouring countries, ÖIR conducted interviews with various stakeholders and two case studies (in the "Seestadt Aspern" in the 22nd district and in the settlement "Wohnen am Marchfeldkanal" in the 21st district).

The following text presents and discusses the results of the study on the basis of selected core questions:



Figure 1: Neighbourly opening ceremony in the case study area (Source: Büro Jauschneg)

Which digital neighbourhood platforms exist in Vienna and which groups of people and topics are addressed by them?

The spectrum of digital neighbourhood platforms ranges from small-scale Facebook groups and larger Facebook pages to professionally operated platforms with a Vienna-wide reach. In addition, more and more people are organizing themselves via messenger services such as WhatsApp. Depending on the focus of the platform, the targeting varies: some platforms mainly target specific segments of the population - such as students or people of retirement age – others do not engage in targeting. The functionalities and discussion topics of these platforms include event announcements, free neighbourly help, the formation of interest groups, references to the local economy, the establishment of digital marketplaces, and the announcement of local news.

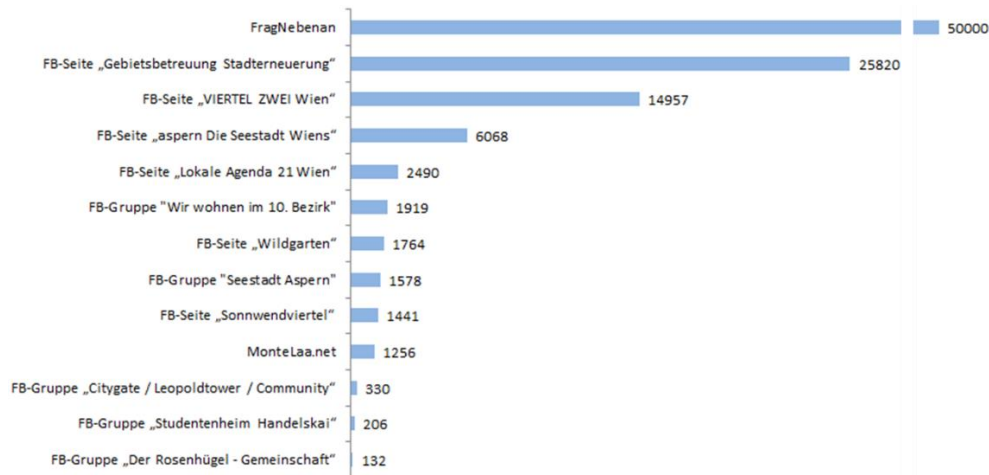


Figure 2: Number of persons reached per investigated platform in Vienna, FB stands for Facebook, summer 2019 (Source: ÖIR, 2019)

What contribution can digital neighbourhood platforms make to counteract social exclusion in a large city like Vienna?

Digital tools and platforms lower the participation threshold in community interactions. They enable increased accessibility by creating additional contact points. The hurdle to express yourself or address someone is smaller than in the real world. Particularly people with reduced mobility are able to communicate more easily, as they can also communicate from home. Socially excluded people can find people in similar social groups. Furthermore, newcomers (by getting to know the new neighbourhood), single parents (e.g. by finding childcare and exchanging experiences) and increasingly digital-savvy older people can benefit from neighbourhood platforms. However, the interviews also emphasised that digital platforms cannot solve certain problems of living together; this can only be achieved via direct, human contact. Virtual platforms do not replace social services of the City of Vienna, but can only support and complement them.

What are the interaction potentials between digital neighbourhoods and public institutions?

As emerged from the interviews, social media enables "communication at eye level" and thus increasingly dissolves hierarchical thinking. It is an effective means to draw attention to different offers and services and offer important insights into the local sensitivities and needs of citizens "as mood indicators". Direct communication has a lower-threshold than the classical official channel and enables different target groups to be reached in new ways by the administrative offices of the City of Vienna. Increased active involvement on the part of the administration on existing or new digital neighbourhood platforms can help to revitalise their image. As an example, interviewees proposed the establishment of a separate function (e.g. as a submenu "In conversation with the city" - similar to the reports in district newspapers) or the broadcasting of videos explaining how the administration works from the citizens' point of view. Interviewees also discussed two different forms of how administration can be integrated into existing digital platforms. On the one hand, the administration could carry out a kind of "theme monitoring", in which the administration in a passive role reads out the themes currently discussed on platforms in order to draw conclusions for its own administrative activities. On the other hand, a more active approach could be chosen,

in which the administration can use digital neighbourhood platforms to specifically input information that is relevant for citizens.

Through a stronger presence on social media, public institutions are given the opportunity to actively present themselves and their services to a broad public. Well managed platforms, on which new projects are presented proactively and positively, also offer the possibility of reducing headwinds in the run-up to new construction projects. However, in order to grant access to information to all persons (i.e. also persons who do not use the Internet), analogue forms of communication have to be maintained.

What influence do new housing developments have on existing housing stock?

Incumbent residents often perceive new development areas as "islands". Residents may often organise locally to resist these during construction. Well-managed exchange and mutual dialogue may minimise conflicts and highlight the benefits from the new development areas and the new infrastructure they contain. Different digital platforms can disseminate current information quickly and to support mutual networking and getting to know each other. Since in-house WhatsApp groups or websites of house communities are usually closed and exist parallel to each other, platforms should be used for this purpose which are accessible to all and thus enable a mutual networking between people from the new building and the old stock. New residents can ask questions and benefit from the existing experiences. Simplified communication can also promote cross-residential thinking within new building projects. In addition, open platforms contribute to making the new development areas and the infrastructures they contain more visible.

The new infrastructure can generate added value for the housing stock. This should, however, be taken into account at the planning stage and well communicated with both new and existing residents on an area. Mutual exchange and getting to know each other promote different joint initiatives and a mutual knowledge transfer. Local residents can, for example, act as so-called "local heroes" and share their knowledge of the area with the new residents, as well as organise joint bicycle tours or walks. By bringing people with similar interests together, prejudices can be overcome. New innovative shops, pubs or mobility opportunities are also created to the benefit of local residents. The new residents can revive existing infrastructure (such as restaurants) and become members of existing social offers (e.g. associations). Through the integration of innovative elements, different target groups are also integrated into the process and reached. The organisation of joint settlement festivals or the creation of attractive meeting spaces in public places also promote the mutual exchange and the bringing together of new and old residents in the "Grätzl" (neighbourhood). The new buildings and the infrastructure created also promote a social mix and generate new job opportunities - from which all people can benefit.

What contribution do neighbourhood platforms make to climate protection in cities?

At first glance, there seems to be little to no direct connection between the establishment of digital neighbourhood platforms and climate protection. A closer look, however, reveals numerous indirect effects. On the one hand, digital neighbourhood platforms to a certain extent support the concept of the "city of short distances". The users receive numerous tips from their neighbourhood on how to organise their lives locally. Better networking with neighbours provides more information about local activities and events. Leisure partners can be found in the neighbourhood, joint activities are increasingly carried out in the immediate living environment and in their own

region. More activities in the Grätzl and a stronger local cooperation help to reduce distances for leisure activities, a reduction of distances saves car-km, fuel and greenhouse gas emissions. Due to their presence in digital neighbourhood platforms, the offerings of local businesses - such as shops and restaurants - are increasingly being used, thus eliminating longer journeys for shopping or restaurant visits. If like-minded people can connect within the same Grätzl, it is also easier to form car pools in leisure traffic. This increases the occupancy rate of cars and again saves fuel and CO₂. Further thought could be given to carpooling for commuting and organised as a car-sharing exchange via digital neighbourhood platforms. Digital platforms are also a suitable medium for raising awareness of climate protection issues. Users can disseminate information quickly, such as conscious shopping or sustainable mobility behaviour. They may also save resources by borrowing, giving away or selling various objects in the neighbourhood, as there is reduced need to buy new products. In addition to giving away items, users can advertise food that is no longer used but still in perfect condition (for example, through the "Fair-Teiler" initiative). The establishment and organisation of community gardens is also increasingly coordinated via digital platforms. Community gardens increase the stay in the surrounding area and thus reduce car journeys "into the countryside". Growing their own fruit and vegetables reduces transport routes. Especially in densely built-up urban areas, cooling effects from planting are becoming more and more important and they also make a contribution against soil sealing caused by cities. In addition, community gardens promote local awareness and environmental education and make clear which alternatives exist for the use of public space and the handling of food.

What are the interactions between digitalisation and real neighbourhood worlds?

Digital platforms can generate different forms of neighbourly relationships, but the functions and depths of neighbourly networking are very different. Some interactions on neighbourhood platforms primarily take place on virtual level and the resulting real encounters are of a fleeting nature (e.g. by borrowing objects for short periods). These can also lead to regular meetings and real relationships such as friendships. With the help of digital media, the radius of communication in the neighbourhood increases and thus also the possibility of networking. Information can be disseminated quickly, interactions and coexistence promoted, identification with one's own district increased and participation made possible. However, since platforms are used actively or passively by people to varying degrees, so-called "carers" are needed - i.e. people who get involved and keep communications and activities in the neighbourhood up to date. Users primarily network with "like-minded people" who have similar interests and support each other if necessary. However, there is also the possibility that neighbourhood platforms can also promote cross-milieu contacts between people and thus strengthen bridge-building social capital (Schreiber and Göppert, 2018)¹.

With the help of platforms, the neighbourhood and the people living in it can easily be explored. As literature shows, virtual spaces and real neighbourhoods are already closely interwoven, so that an isolated consideration of these two worlds is no longer considered meaningful. Information on the platforms refers to the real neighbourhood.

Conclusion

In the analysis, the motivation of the operators to establish a platform as well as the functions of the individual platforms were analysed in detail. The main functions are: announcements of (local)

¹ Schreiber, F. und Göppert, H. (2018): Wandel von Nachbarschaft in Zeiten digitaler Vernetzung. Explorationsstudie zur Wirkung digitaler Medien mit lokalem Bezug auf sozialen Zusammenhalt und lokale Teilhabe in Quartieren. Berlin: adelphi.

events, offer of free help, references to the local economy (especially shops and restaurants) and/or the use as a virtual marketplace.

In addition, the interactions between virtual and real neighbourhoods were analysed in more detail. The results of this analysis suggest that with the help of digital neighbourhood platforms simplified communication in the neighbourhood, especially at small-scale district level, can be promoted. They also serve as “mood indicators” for local needs and issues. In order to promote the communication via such platforms, their functionality must be adapted to the respective target groups and designed in a user-friendly way. With regard to the interaction between neighbourhoods and public institutions, neighbourhood platforms can promote a more direct and transparent discussion in both directions. Further it can support the networking of new and old parts of the town. In summary, well-moderated platforms support the interaction between people living in the same neighbourhood. They counteract social exclusion, contribute to the promotion of social sustainability (as one of the four pillars of publicly funded housing in Vienna), and support the idea of smart city and sharing economy.

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