

Street-level bureaucrats: tensions and challenges in online placemaking

Street-level
bureaucrats

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media have become a key part of placemaking. Placemaking revolves around collaboration between multiple stakeholders, which requires ongoing two-way communication between local government and citizens. Although social media offer promising tools for local governments and public professionals in placemaking, they have not lived up to their potential. This paper aims to uncover the tensions and challenges that social media bring for public professionals at the street level in placemaking processes.

Design/methodology/approach – This study aims to fill this gap with a case study of area brokers engaged in online placemaking in Amsterdam. In total, 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on area brokers' social media practices, perceptions and challenges. The authors used an open coding strategy in the first phase of coding. In the second phase, the authors regrouped codes in thematic categories with the use of sensitizing concepts derived from the theoretical review.

Findings – The use of social media for placemaking imposes demands on area brokers from three sides: the bureaucracy, the affordances of social media and affective publics. The paper unpacks pressures area brokers are under and the (emotional) labour they carry out to align policy and bureaucratic requirements with adequate communication needed in neighbourhood affairs on social media. The tensions and the multidimensionality of what is required explain the reluctance of area brokers to exploit the potential of social media in their work.

Originality/value – Several studies have addressed the use of social media in placemaking, but all neglected the perspective of street-level bureaucrats who shape the placemaking process in direct contact with citizens.

Keywords Placemaking, Street-level bureaucrats, Bureaucracy, Social media affordances, Affective publics, Emotional labour

Paper type Case study



Introduction

Placemaking has become a common urban governance approach for neighbourhoods (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014; Kalandides, 2018; Strydom *et al.*, 2018; Bain and Landau, 2019). It concerns a set of social, political and material practices through which stakeholders develop and redevelop the experienced places in which people live and work (Pierce *et al.*, 2011).

Recent literature commonly approaches placemaking as a participatory and enabling strategy, wherein officials facilitate citizen participation and enable communities to take part in place development (Strydom *et al.*, 2018; Kalandides, 2018). In placemaking, municipalities move away from top-down urban policies, towards participatory and bottom-up processes of urban planning, design and management (Silberberg *et al.*, 2013). “Street-level bureaucrats” (SLBs) (Lipsky, 1980) play an important role in these participatory placemaking processes; these officials function as linking pins between residents and municipalities (Agger and Poulsen, 2017; Bartels, 2020).

Given the importance of communication in placemaking and the increased usage of social media in public communication, there is now significant interest in the use of social media in placemaking and affiliated fields (Kleinhans *et al.*, 2015; Lin and Geertman, 2019). This literature shows potential benefits for; citizen-government communication (Mergel, 2013), enabling new forms of participation and collaboration (De Lange and De Waal, 2019; Münster *et al.*, 2017) and fostering quick awareness of issues of concern (Dilawar *et al.*, 2018; Chun and Reyes, 2012). Some (Lin and Geertman, 2019; Kleinhans *et al.*, 2015; Williamson and Ruming, 2020) are less optimistic about the use of social media to increase participation, arguing that “real two-way communication and networking between residents, governments and policymakers through social media is still scarce” (Kleinhans *et al.*, 2015, p. 241). Falco and Kleinhans’ (2018) literature review highlights organizational (e.g. social media strategies) and technological challenges (e.g. information communication and technology infrastructure) that hinder citizen-government interactions through social media. Surprisingly, literature addressing the (presumed) usefulness of social media for placemaking has largely ignored the perspective of the SLBs who actually have to do the placemaking communication between government and residents.

Therefore, this paper addresses the implications of social media use for the SLBs tasked by municipalities to facilitate public engagement and collaboration in placemaking processes. This is important as SLBs are the ones who align the needs of the municipal organization, the residents and must live up to the demands of social media communication. How SLBs use social media, shapes the online interaction between residents and the municipality and affects participation and collaboration processes in placemaking. This paper investigates the experience of SLBs with the professional use of social media through a case study in Amsterdam-North, The Netherlands.

In 2013, the city of Amsterdam introduced an area-focused governance approach [*Gebiedsgericht Werken*], that involves placemaking. Thus, the municipality aims to engage in constructive collaboration with existing networks of local stakeholders (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2013; Bartels, 2020; Majoor, 2016). Key to the implementation of area-focused work is the *area broker* [*gebiedsmakelaar*]. They personally maintain relationships with residents and other local stakeholders, to bridge the gap between the municipalities’ political-administrative processes and the everyday experiences of residents (Majoor, 2016). Rather than setting up formal participation procedures, area brokers engage with residents and other local stakeholders wherever they are (Bartels, 2020).

As social media have become an intrinsic part of communication practices there is a need to better understand how social media are incorporated into the work of SLBs. As citizens express and connect through social media, specifically the proliferation of Facebook and Twitter conversations about local issues and policies, municipalities feel the pressure to have social media presence and enter into dialogue with residents through social media (Khan *et al.*, 2014; De Goede *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the question of when and how area brokers use social media and which tensions and challenges they face deserves thorough investigation.

Theoretical discussion

This section presents the analytical frame (Figure 1) for this study. The frame explicates three main demands that create tensions for SLBs when engaging in online placemaking through social media:

- (1) Demands of the bureaucracy when SLBs use social media as a linking pin between municipality and citizens.
- (2) Demands resulting from the affordances of social media technology.
- (3) Demands implicitly posed by the affective publics, in and through which participants express and attune their thoughts and feelings on neighbourhood affairs in affectively loaded posts, comments and emoticons.

These demands cause tensions and challenges for the SLBs who need to align the various demands. Explicating how area brokers deal with bureaucratic frictions, balance the mechanical and cultural affordances of social media and engage with affective publics will help to advance theory and practices of online placemaking.

Introduction: online placemaking

Placemaking as conceptualized in this paper fits a trend in which local governments see a more modest role for themselves (Bartels, 2020), by trying to work bottom-up at the neighbourhood level. Emphasis is on a process of activation and empowerment of citizens and other local stakeholders, encouraging them to collaborate in placemaking as equal partners (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014; Kalandides, 2018; Strydom *et al.*, 2018; Bain and Landau, 2019). In online placemaking, two main types of practices can be distinguished: online citizen-government engagement and online sentiment analysis.

Falco and Kleinhans (2019) identify four levels of online citizen-government engagement: information sharing, interaction, coproduction and self-organization. For SLBs, the first three forms imply an increasing degree of interaction through social media, from publicizing municipal affairs to building and maintaining a network of local stakeholders, to organizing and promoting cooperation. The fourth level, self-organization, emphasizes interaction among citizens and involves little interaction between SLBs and citizens.

Online placemaking also includes the use of social media to gauge neighbourhood sentiment. Online sentiment analysis, defined as the “computational study of people’s opinions, appraisals, attitudes and emotions towards entities, individuals, issues, events, topics and their attributes” (Liu and Zhang’s, 2012: p. 415), can contribute to matching the wishes of citizens to policy (Desouza and Jacob, 2014) and to a better (and quicker) grasp of public opinion (González-Bailón, 2013).

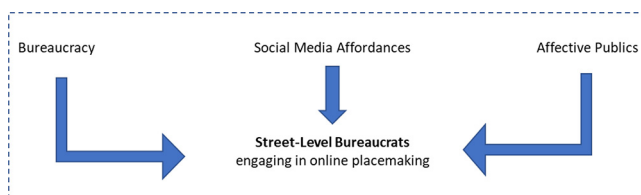


Figure 1. Demands from three sides (the bureaucracy, social media affordances and affective publics) on SLBs engaging in online placemaking

Street-level bureaucrats and the bureaucracy

Area brokers are so-called SLBs. They are officials working in bureaucratic organizations who interact directly with citizens and have some discretion to improvise and match local situations with governmental policies (Lipsky, 1980). Within neighbourhood placemaking, this may involve mediating between municipality and residents regarding loitering youth or a neighbourhood party (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021) or facilitating an entrepreneur in developing a vegan restaurant with a garden (Eshuis and Gerrits, 2021). Such SLBs play a role in placemaking in many countries, including The Netherlands (Eshuis and Gerrits, 2021), Denmark, Sweden (Agger and Poulsen, 2017) and the UK (Escobar, 2011).

The discretion considered so important for SLBs also applies to how they operate. In our case, they have discretion in interacting face-to-face or through digital communication (telephone, e-mail and social media) with citizens (Buffat, 2015; Jorna and Wagenaar, 2007). Their autonomy can cause friction with the bureaucracy (Agger and Poulsen, 2017; Meijer and Torenvlied, 2016). When SLBs use social media, they decentralize and personalize communication with residents. This runs counter to formal and impersonal procedures and to the hierarchical and centralized control that is common to bureaucracies (Hughes, 2003). Although direct communication is in line with societal demands for municipalities to be more approachable and interactive, it clashes with the bureaucratic tendencies of most government organizations “to organize their communications through a set of centralized and formal working methods” (Meijer and Torenvlied, 2016, p. 144).

The co-existence of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic communication leads to two challenges. Firstly, concerns over “the management of communicative risks” (ibid, p. 158) when SLBs independently use social media to communicate with large groups without governmental gatekeepers checking content. Secondly, “the risk of not processing communicative signals adequately” (ibid, p. 158), when signals appearing through social media are not channelled properly through the municipal organization.

Needham *et al.* (2017) draw attention to another bureaucratic demand, namely, to show an appropriate lack of emotion in interaction with citizens. The authors draw on the concept of emotional labour to explain that “the effort to suppress inappropriate emotions and/or elicit appropriate emotions within oneself or in another person, where ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ are dictated by the demands of the job” (p. 290). SLBs combine autonomy in their interaction with residents with being official representatives of the municipality. They need to conform to existing rules and procedures and respond carefully in neutral ways to individual citizens (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000). The case study below shows how tensions and challenges emerge from this need to use appropriate emotions in social media interactions with citizens.

Social media affordances

Social media, like any media, enable and constrain particular kinds of communication more than others (Breek *et al.*, 2021; Ostertag and Ortiz, 2017). Media studies use the term “affordance” to conceptualize what technologies such as social media allow and disallow people to do (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Social media are not neutral communication instruments but shape the way people interact and engage by supporting and prohibiting specific forms of communication (Nagy and Neff, 2015).

Ostertag and Ortiz (2017) usefully distinguish two types of affordances of social media, namely, mechanical and cultural affordances. According to them, do mechanical and cultural affordances “play mutually supportive roles in how people digitally, emotionally and mentally connect with each other through social media” (p. 63). Mechanical affordance refers to functional aspects of social media platforms, in particular their ability to enable the network and the flow of interaction. The notion of cultural affordances defines the expressiveness of exchange. Importantly, the mechanical and cultural affordances of social

media allow certain forms of communication whilst constraining others, which affects the bandwidth of online engagement with citizens. Both kinds of affordances come with their own demands which impact the work of area brokers.

Affective publics

Papacharissi (2015, 2016) points to social media affordances in what she calls affective publics. She argues that with contentious issues, the affordances of social media instigate effective forms of collaborative storytelling, characterized by an emotive and pathic tone and form, which connects the participants in online discursive communities. Affective publics emerge online when people join discussions such as on developments in their neighbourhood, sharing “mediated feelings of connectedness”, rather than just rational opinions (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 308). Previous research (Breek *et al.*, 2021) has shown that such affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015, 2016) can mobilize effective expressions and attunement, converging colloquial thoughts and feelings into public opinion about neighbourhood affairs.

Especially in gentrifying neighbourhoods (such as our case study) competing affective publics co-exist, each shaping its own narrative about the neighbourhood (Breek *et al.*, 2021). The meaning-making and shaping of public opinion in affective publics, thus, impact the social and political landscape in urban neighbourhoods (Breek *et al.*, 2021). So, there is pressure on local authorities to be present in effective social media dialogues, but nevertheless, real two-way social media communication is still scarce (De Goede *et al.*, 2017; Falco and Kleinans, 2018).

Methods and analysis

Research strategy

This paper applies a case study approach to research how SLBs, specifically area brokers, use social media in placemaking. Following the logic of qualitative research, we deliberately selected a case rich in information on the topic (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Area focused work in Amsterdam North was selected because:

- Online communication plays an important role in placemaking there.
- Multiple affective publics could be identified (Breek *et al.*, 2021).
- Area brokers play important roles as linking pins between government and residents.

It is their explicit mandate to facilitate citizen participation in placemaking.

Research methods

This study draws mainly on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 area brokers (out of 14) in Amsterdam Noord and four municipal communication specialists between January 2019 and November 2019. All 14 area brokers were approached for an interview and 10 agreed to be interviewed. With 10 of the 14 area brokers active in Amsterdam Noord, solid coverage of area brokers was ensured. The full variety in age, gender, work experience and area type (residential or business) of area brokers was covered. In addition, four municipal communication specialists were interviewed for their elaborate knowledge of social media use by the municipality. Supplementary to the interviews, content analysis of dialogue on neighbourhood-oriented Facebook pages were used as background information and to triangulate the interview data.

Interviews of 45 to 90 min were conducted in an open manner, focusing on:

- How SLBs use social media in their work (practices).
- Their views of social media in their work and the municipal communication strategy (perceptions).
- Tensions and challenges related to social media encountered in their work.

Data analysis

The MAXQDA coding programme was used to analyse the data. In this explorative and qualitative research, we used “sensitizing concepts as interpretive devices” (Bowen, 2006, p. 14) to guide our analyses. In the first inductive phase of open coding, practices, perceptions and challenges were identified in the data. Each new practice, perception or challenge received a new sub-code.

Next, based on our theoretical review, we used bureaucracy, mechanical affordances, cultural affordances and affective publics as sensitizing concepts to develop thematic categories from the data. We close read and interpreted the open coded segments in relation to the overarching sensitizing concepts. This led to re-grouping of the open coding challenges in newly formed thematic categories. After a whilst no new thematic categories emerged, which meant that theoretical saturation was reached. The thematic grouping of challenges connected to the sensitizing concepts is presented in Tables 1–4 in the empirical findings section.

Area-focused governance in Amsterdam-Noord

Amsterdam is governed by the city council in collaboration with its seven districts, of which Amsterdam-Noord is one (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2013). For area-focused work, Noord is divided into three areas: *Noord-Oost*, *Noord-West* and *Oud-Noord*. Each area has a team of four or five area brokers (Figure 2).

Noord is on the northern side of the river IJ. It is a relatively large district, but with 11% of the total population, not very densely populated (OIS Amsterdam, 2016). After a period of economic and demographic decline, following the closing of shipping-related heavy industry

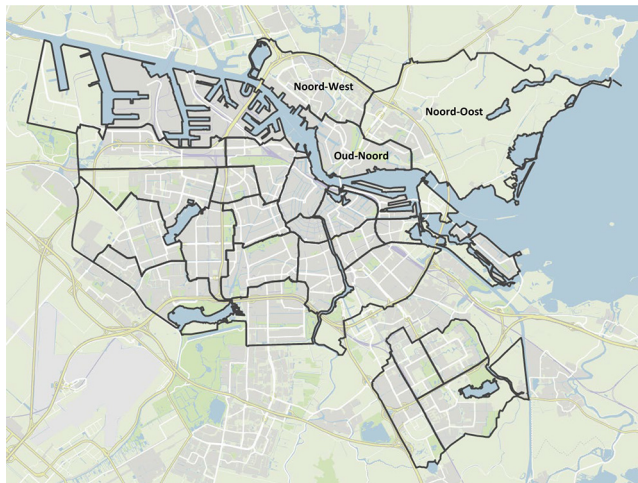


Figure 2.
Amsterdam areas
and the 3 areas in
Noord

Source: Adapted from <https://maps.amsterdam.nl/gebiedsindeling>

in the 1980s, the new millennium precluded a significant urban transformation of the district (Milikowski, 2018). New leisure hotspots developed in industrial heritage sites and the (re) development of housing created an influx of high-educated newcomers (Savini and Dembski, 2016). Noord gentrified, which led to a dichotomy in the neighbourhood, with residents predating this transformation feeling alienated (Kamp and Welschen, 2019; Breek *et al.*, 2021).

Empirical findings

Social media practices and perceptions

The interviews show that most area brokers engage in social media practices for their work, next to direct interaction with professionals, residents and other local stakeholders. A common use of social media practice is analysing the sentiment (8 of 10 area brokers) and also using social media for internal communication in the municipality, as well as external communication (6 out of 10 area brokers).

The case of the introduction of paid parking in 2019, exemplifies these online practices by area brokers. Paid parking was a drastic policy change for many residents, causing considerable discontent. As a result, several area brokers were confronted with social unrest. For example, cars of residents who parked in streets where paid parking had not yet been introduced were punctured. Area brokers attentively following the social media conversations signalled the escalating frenzy and gained a better sense of what residents were concerned about. They collected emotional responses and the practical experiences of residents to subsequently voice them to the appropriate municipal departments. Area broker Ruben [1]:

“Then once it has been introduced [paid parking], as area brokers, we have gathered all the [social media] signals that we get about paid parking and then they go to Parking, [so] that they know what is going on, what is not going well”.

Area brokers facilitate an exchange of information that goes two ways. They use social media to inform residents affected by the new policy about the formal political process and clarify what options residents have, to participate in decision-making processes. Area broker Kevin says:

“What I do in there [in the neighbourhood group], reports that are public, I’ll share, this is what the idea is, this is the occasion [when, where] to speak [to the council], let your voice be heard”.

The example shows how social media are used to connect the bureaucratic reality of the policymakers with residents’ everyday experiences (Majoer, 2016), the core task of area brokers.

Whilst social media have become an intrinsic part of the local realities the area brokers deal with, only 2 out of 10 area brokers in Noord have structurally integrated social media in their work. These two were positive social media users, continuously building and maintaining their online neighbourhood network, monitoring conversations and posting information. One of them extensively tried to stimulate citizen participation through dialogue on social media. Three other area brokers were active on social media and convinced of its usability but also referred to downsides such as social media interaction sometimes being unclear and uncontrollable.

Remarkable, given the potential of social media claimed in academic literature, was the negative attitude towards social media among five other area brokers. This group did not aspire to a professional presence online. Although three of them occasionally checked online sentiment, they otherwise stayed away from using social media as a professional tool.

To further analyse these variations in use and perception of social media among area brokers, we now turn to tensions and challenges related to the position of area brokers within the municipal bureaucracy; the lack of organizational embeddedness of SLBs social media practices and the SLBs relative professional autonomy to interact with residents and other stakeholders.

The bureaucracy

This section focuses on the challenges and tension related to the position of area brokers within the municipal bureaucracy. See [Table 2](#) for an overview.

In Amsterdam, most communication with the municipality is channelled through the municipal customer contact centre. Area-focused work though is not a fully integrated part of this centrally organized communication structure. Whilst much municipal information concerning the areas is communicated by communication departments, the area broker is seen as an independent pivot point of interaction between municipality and citizen. Area brokers communicate predominantly without municipal gatekeeping, also on social media.

Although this was not explicitly framed as a communicative risk for the municipality in the interviews, the municipal social media team (SMT) gave nonmandatory training to area brokers and other locally operating officials, to help them with their online presence. In 2019 the SMT stopped the social media training courses because of a lack of enthusiasm. The area brokers also note the absence of guidelines and coordination on the district level. Some consulted occasionally with their area-assigned communication adviser about specific social media conversations, but the area brokers had no structural conversations about the do and do not within social media.

This lack of professionalization of social media communication was remarkable because a municipal communication professional in Noord expressed that their department wanted to integrate social media into the area brokers' work routines. She stressed the potential of social media for area focused work:

"[...] the area brokers bring the outside inside, but what is the outside? Outside is when I walk out of the office here and go into Noord, the streets, the squares, the neighbourhoods. But [the outside is] also present online". (*Communications adviser Jennifer*)

Given the online accessibility of the "outside world", the municipal communication department wishes to ensure that all area brokers in Noord will also use social media for their work. In 2015, they requested that all area brokers open individual professional Facebook pages. The idea was, that with their personal Facebook page, the area brokers would do more than simply join the various online neighbourhood groups and communicate official policy and grasp online sentiment. Area brokers were to participate actively in ongoing conversations to prevent potential unrest and problems for the district. Districts' spokeswoman Marie:

Challenges related to the bureaucracy	Mentioned by area broker
No clear expectations or job description about social media use	5
Implicit pressure from the communications department	2
Lack of professionalization of social media communication	6
Occasional individuals consult with a communication adviser	5
Being on their own	2
Sovereignty in social media	6

Table 1.
Challenges and tensions related to the bureaucracy

“Sometimes by simply answering you can tackle something that will then prevent it from following its course of development into an online petition or someone from the city council getting tagged. So, you can intervene in that conversation just by being there and occasionally raising your hand or giving an answer”.

Despite these ambitions, the area brokers were free to decide whether and how to use social media. Although two area brokers felt implicit pressure from the communications department, the use of social media was not explicitly stated in their job description.

According to a majority of the area brokers, their professional autonomy to determine how they use social media fits with their specific role as area brokers. As area broker Robin says:

“You can do [social media] your own way, that fits with the role you have as an area broker because it very much depends on your personality, what you do. You are constantly talking to people, you cannot do that as a robot civil servant, so you must give it a piece of yourself. If you were to make a policy for [how to use] social media, it would be very difficult. People are not comfortable with being told how to act. When you are part of the madness of social media, not everyone always comes out well”.

Leeway in social media usage is in line with the discretionary space SLBs need (Lipsky, 1980).

Thus, area brokers' position in relation to the bureaucracy, was one of the representatives of the municipality with much discretion but also lacking clear policy, support and guidelines on how to enact this role on social media. This means that when area brokers used social media to interact with residents, they were mostly on their own, figuring out appropriate and effective ways of communicating without much back-up or protocols.

Mechanical affordances of social media: unmanageable and uncertain

The area brokers mainly use Facebook and WhatsApp for their online placemaking. Both platforms have certain reach and networking capabilities (Ostertag and Ortiz, 2017), so-called mechanical affordances. Four challenges were identified regarding the mechanical affordances of Facebook and WhatsApp (Table 2).

The first challenge is related to the fact that social media interaction is automatically documented and can involve high numbers of people. This characteristic reinforced *anxiety to make mistakes*, as voiced by area broker Roos:

“And now you can talk to the whole outside world. That's fine, but you are only human, so every now and then, you might just type a word wrong which can be misinterpreted”.

To represent the municipality within social media conversations produced stress for the area brokers. This was aggravated by the nature of their work, as they sometimes needed to respond on the go, which prevented careful consideration. Area broker Kevin:

“[...] in my case I would be freewheeling, typing on your cell phone small keyboard. So, I would not have a sharp way of formulating or of expressing my thoughts completely clearly”.

Challenges related to mechanical affordances	Mentioned by interviewee	
Anxiety for making mistakes	3	Table 2. Challenges regarding mechanical affordances
Expectations of availability	6	
Amount of social media communication	7	
Social media listening/surveillance/privacy	7	

Another interrelated challenge mentioned by a majority of interviewees pertains to residents' expectations of the area brokers' online availability. On the social media area, brokers were always personally addressed. No customer contact centre will take over their communications. This pushed area brokers to participate in the conversation at inconvenient times. Area broker Robin illustrates:

"I see Jeffery [area broker] respond on Saturday or Sunday and I see him just doing that, I know he has no interest in it, but he does".

Seven area brokers also mentioned that overview is difficult when you are confronted with a large volume of social media communication: what to select and how to follow up? As the municipality's eyes and ears in the neighbourhood, area brokers felt responsible for picking up all relevant signals. Ongoing and oftentimes elaborate interaction over everyday neighbourhood events and issues in multiple Facebook and WhatsApp groups makes this a less than a straightforward task. Dealing with the stream of posts, likes and comments, mostly colloquial neighbourhood chitchat, can obstruct seeing and addressing the more consequential issues. Area broker Kevin:

"I find that I can handle it, that I can handle the flow, a whole fluctuating flow, when I can see what is at stake, then I can refer a lot to others and also solve more structural problems".

The sheer amount of social media conversations out there causes feelings of not being able to keep track and losing the overview, also regarding the consequential handling and response.

Another major challenge concerns respecting others' privacy. A social media presence can turn into a form of unannounced social media surveillance, which is at odds with privacy regulations. For example, when a communication specialist registered herself as a resident in a closed neighbourhood related Facebook group, to then read the conversations from her professional perspective without mentioning she was a municipal official. The interviewed area brokers themselves had all openly registered as area brokers, but even then, tensions arose regarding the privacy of other participants. One area broker indicated that not all participants were aware he was allowed in the neighbourhood WhatsApp group. Some residents were added later or had forgotten there was also a civil servant in their group whilst talking about unlawful activities, as quoted by area broker Kevin:

"Then there is the [online] Blauwe Zand vigilante group, I had to register there, I had to register myself there and I was admitted and things were shared there, like, I am ready for stabbing some [car] tires, that kind of texts passed there".

These kinds of conversations in closed groups, complicate social media use, as the area brokers must consider whether and how to report them.

Online placemaking requires careful relationship building and maintenance. It cannot depend on publicizing official statements and simple one-on-one online contact. As a result, area brokers are faced with the task of mingling discretely among citizens, translating and selling municipal policy and providing the first point of contact for questions. In addition, they are supposed to do this without a professional support network, clear policy or protocols and to be available 24/7 as social media platforms never close. So, paradoxically, online placemaking requires discretion for SLBs but also pleads for municipal structures in which it can be embedded.

Cultural affordances: balancing communicative expressions

Like all media, social media come with set of norms and expectations as to how to use them. These unwritten rules of behaviour shared by its users allow certain forms and expressions

and prohibit others, for example, the usage of emoji in certain contexts. Such cultural expectations coupled with media technologies are known as cultural affordances (Ostertag and Ortiz, 2017). Table 3 presents three tensions and challenges regarding cultural affordances that were mentioned by the interviewees.

To start, half of the area brokers mentioned explicitly they felt limited in their communicative expressions when using social media. Whilst citizens were free to interact in personal and emotional ways and get angry or promote something enthusiastically, the area brokers, knowing their communication is documented, had to be professionally reticent. Area broker Jeffery explains:

“Look when I walk through the neighbourhood, you can also say to residents, it just sucks, I can’t help it, things happen, it sucks. I don’t do that online”.

On the one hand, this comes with the territory. From public officials, correct language, self-control and professional neutrality in communication are to be expected. They need to maintain impartiality. For this reason, they tried to avoid responding with emotion.

On the other hand, area brokers are tasked to bridge the gap between the municipality and the lifeworld of the citizen. It is important, therefore, that they connect with residents and communicate on an equal footing. This begs for language that fits residents’ language, instead of an official language that might alienate them. The area brokers’ tone of voice should match the residents’, said communications adviser Jennifer:

“That you address them in such a tone, that people still understand you. So, not suddenly a business tone, but just keep it personal because it [area broker] is actually your personal entry to the neighbourhood”.

For this reason, one area broker explicitly stated, that area brokers should never position themselves solely as a “hatch” for municipality communication. This would undermine their position in relation to local stakeholders with the municipality.

Another challenge regarding cultural affordances of social media is correct timing and ensuring there is neither too little nor too much space for citizen participation in online conversations. Although a high response speed is expected, not responding or intervening in social media conversations immediately, is part of effective area-focused work. It stimulates self-reliance among residents. As area broker Robin says, *if you, as an area broker, are part of the conversation, you are also part of the solution*. Staying out of online conversations entirely at times is also an attractive option. In particular when residents express overly high expectations of their say in municipal actions, whilst those options were limited or not available at all. Area broker Ruben:

“[Residents] could have the impression that they have a lot more to say about the future via Facebook, but that is not the case, that is one thing for us as area brokers and as a municipality that we should be aware of this”.

This paragraph has highlighted the tensions between the formal and procedural communication required for official representatives of local government and the culturally

Challenges related to cultural affordances	Mentioned by interviewee
Limited in their communicative expressions	5
Tone of voice	9
Timing and dosing	6

Table 3.
Challenges regarding cultural affordances

mandated personal, colloquial and emotional communication on social media. Determining the right tone of voice and timing of interaction can, thus, be emotionally labourious. Not in the least because area brokers must constantly be aware of the emotions caused by their interactions.

The next section addresses how communicating with networked participants in affective publics rather than with individuals, amplifies the emotional stress of online placemaking.

Affective publics: potentially slippery and time-consuming

Most of the area brokers' social media usage revolved around interacting with neighbourhood-related Facebook and WhatsApp groups. In these online communities, residents communicate about all kinds of neighbourhood issues and events. Especially with defining topics such as the introduction of paid parking, they would burst into the intense and emotional debate and reconstitute as affective publics. For the brokers, this created tensions and presented several challenges (Table 4).

For one, six interviews mentioned that partaking in online conversations is a slippery and time-consuming activity. Particularly stressful is when the interaction around a topic suddenly intensifies and starts to shape public opinion in which the municipality is involved. Area broker Anna:

“Facebook posts will lead a life of their own before you know it [. . .]. You actually have to respond in some cases because very often because there is some detraction from the truth”.

The area brokers experienced, that intervening in these emotionally infused conversations, did not necessarily result in reconciliation. On the contrary, their intervention often triggered all kinds of emotional reactions by other participants, potentially derailing the conversation. Area broker Benno:

“An e-mail is more personal, [. . .] Then they usually use other languages than on Facebook and [on] Facebook they are also egged by others. Those [people] do react and then everybody gets angrier”.

The charged emotional atmosphere that can emerge in Facebook and WhatsApp groups, made many area brokers prefer the telephone, e-mail or face-to-face communication. They did not want to be caught in endless and emotionally exhausting online discussions.

A second challenge is the blurring of their private and public persona on social media. Area brokers do not operate as anonymous civil servants, as linking pin they are the personification of the municipality in the neighbourhood. Being present as a personally approachable individual had unintended side effects though. Residents occasionally projected all their negative experiences with the local government onto the area broker. Area broker Ruben:

“Because I know that I'm sometimes the signboard of the municipality and that everything, then often everything comes out [. . .] All experiences with the municipality. This can sometimes be really funny, that someone still has pent-up anger over a tax return that failed in 1995”.

Table 4.
Challenges regarding
affective publics

Challenges related to affective publics	Mentioned by interviewee
Potentially slippery and time-consuming activity.	6
Blurring of a private and public person	6
Interpretation of the data social media produce	9

Whenever area brokers engage in online placemaking, their private person is not detached from their public one. Within the easily escalating emotional social media conversations, they were made personally accountable for municipal policy and actions and sometimes treated aggressively. This is perceived as a serious drawback of using social media.

The third challenge relates to the representation of the community. Although two area brokers emphasized reaching more people and hearing a wider variety of voices through social media communities, they did not see the online communities as a clear-cut or democratic representation of the entire community. Area brokers stated that many online groups represented only one part of the community, the (declining) white working-class residents. This group did not profit from the gentrification of Noord, which made them sceptical commenters on neighbourhood developments and local government.

The limitations in the degree to which affective publics represent the community are at odds with the responsibility that area brokers feel to connect with all parts of the community and to ensure that online placemaking is also an inclusive and democratically sound process. Especially as several interviewees also believed that some residents deliberately framed reporting around certain public events. Or that many social media conversations were unilaterally dominated, with a few reoccurring persons. One area broker explains:

“And on Facebook, there are always the same main characters, folks who respond [...] And do you have to give that particular group so much attention”. (*Area broker Benno*)

Effective social media conversations, forming and collapsing affective publics, are intrinsic to the challenges that area brokers face. With some participants reacting fiercely and negatively, every so often directed towards area brokers, they must decide if and how they respond and participate in the online formation of public opinion. Thus, using social media adds to the emotional labour of their professional work.

Discussion and conclusion

This article aimed to advance our understanding of when and how area brokers use social media and which tensions and challenges they face. Although social media are used by them in online placemaking, this research reveals serious challenges that prevent most area brokers from fully integrating social media in their work.

Our study aligns with current literature addressing social media in placemaking, which shows a nuanced understanding of the potential benefits of social media for placemaking. For example, previous research has shown how residents use social media to exchange and debate opinions about their surroundings (Breek *et al.*, 2018, 2021; Ostertag and Ortiz, 2017). In such practices opinions get expressed and heard, but when affective publics are formed there is also a risk of increased polarization and conflict (Breek *et al.*, 2021). Regarding the usability of social media for local governments, some scholars underlined the potential social media can have for placemaking. Yet, other scholars emphasize that municipalities usually use social media for one-directional communication (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018). When adopted in such a way, placemaking with social media runs the risk of becoming what Arnstein (1969) categorizes as “non-participatory practices” where “residents and stakeholders remain at the side-line”, to “tokenism” with some involvement but no “right to decide” (pg. 217).

With this paper, we have contributed to this growing and nuanced understanding of the usage and usability of social media in placemaking, by focusing on the perspectives of SLBs who cannot resort to one-directional communication due to the nature of their work. The data showed that social media have limited suitability for municipal officials who are actively brokering between the municipality and the neighbourhood.

Firstly, challenges and tensions related to the bureaucracy in which they work and the mechanical affordances of social media constrain the effectiveness and efficiency of social media for area brokers. When using social media, area brokers cannot fall back on the municipal communication infrastructure and policy. Monitoring and analysing social media conversations, engaging in dialogue and discussion and shaping participation initiatives requires institutional support. Without support, social media become unmanageable for area brokers. This is in line with earlier findings, highlighting such organizational challenges (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018; Meijer and Torenvlied, 2016).

This study shows in addition that institutionalization clashes with the discretion and autonomy that area workers need in online placemaking in direct interaction with citizens. The nature of social media interaction, especially within affective publics, ordains that online placemaking is more than anonymous technocrats executing pre-defined standard communication protocols. Area brokers need to participate in person in ongoing processes of public engagement and collaboration. This requires flexible and personal communication and a fitting emotional tone. Area brokers understand their freedom in using social media as an essential condition to handle the paradoxical challenge of online placemaking: to operate in the lifeworld of citizens as a government official. Thus, online placemaking produces a clash between the bureaucracy that requires institutionalization on the one hand and on the other hand autonomy and flexibility for area brokers.

The challenges and tensions related to cultural affordances and the affective dimension of online placemaking underline the forms of emotional labour that need to be performed in social media. Social media conversations between residents resonate with feelings, emotions and affective energy, which area brokers have to relate to. In doing so, they balance being a person and being an official representative of the municipality in the neighbourhood. Their connection with the other online participants needs to be authentic but cannot trigger dispute, something that happens easily among affective publics, formed as they are in a mix of emotional and political sentiments. Social media discussions over neighbourhood affairs can derail suddenly and at great speed, giving area brokers little time and space to follow “correct procedures” or to consult with colleagues. As a result, social media are difficult to fully integrate into their communicative repertoire.

From a municipal placemaking perspective in which there was optimism about the potential benefits of increasing the use of social media in area work, ours might be a disappointing conclusion. Even though social media have been acclaimed for their potential in placemaking, a top-down push to increase the reliance on social media for communication practices runs the risk of burdening area brokers with substantive emotional labour and ignoring the delicate nature of the work of such SLBs. Facilitating participatory processes of local urban development and management asks for personal, authentic and responsive interaction from area brokers. This requires delicate communication and measured response to and display of emotions which is not always feasible for everyone through social media. So discretion not to use social media remains important for area brokers.

Our findings are especially relevant in the context of the COVID-19 crisis which unfolded after the fieldwork for this article was concluded. The social distancing measures limit the options area brokers have for interacting within their respective communities. In addition, the fact that wide-ranging activities have gone digital may have increased the pressure on area brokers to communicate through social media. At the same time, area brokers may have become more competent regarding online communication and innovative communication practices may have emerged. Future research could explore if and how social media use has evolved, whether the loss of in-person contact is mitigated using digital

communication such as social media and how possible changes have affected the burden put on area brokers.

Note

1. The interviews were anonymized by renaming the respondents.

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