Environmental Community Relations: What Can You Learn About a Community From Reviewing Publicly Available Documents?

Using Internet resources to assess communities and their stakeholders

Carol J. Forrest

Experienced community relations/public involvement (CR/PI) specialists typically conduct community assessments before they begin work on projects such as the cleanup of a contaminated site or the renewal or modification of a facility's environmental permits. The community assessment process involves collecting and analyzing information that will help CR/PI specialists and their clients understand:

- who they need to work with,
- how the community or stakeholders within it respond to threats or perceived threats,
- how the community or stakeholders within it prefer to receive information and engage in the public involvement process, and
- if the subject of the CR/PI effort (e.g., the cleanup of a contaminated site) is already known to the public, what residents and officials know or think they know about the situation, and the proposed actions.

Good community assessments provide useful and specific information on stakeholder attitudes, knowledge, behavior, and past issues and events—all of which are vital to designing an effective CR/PI program. They also possess predictive value that can suggest likely future behavior. Thus, clients should view assessments as strategic planning tools.

The Traditional Assessment Model

The traditional assessment involves conducting personal interviews with officials, community leaders (both formal and informal leaders), facility or site neighbors, and the like. Most traditional assessments also involve document research, including reviewing such resources as newspaper stories about the issue in question, demographic data, and land-use plans.

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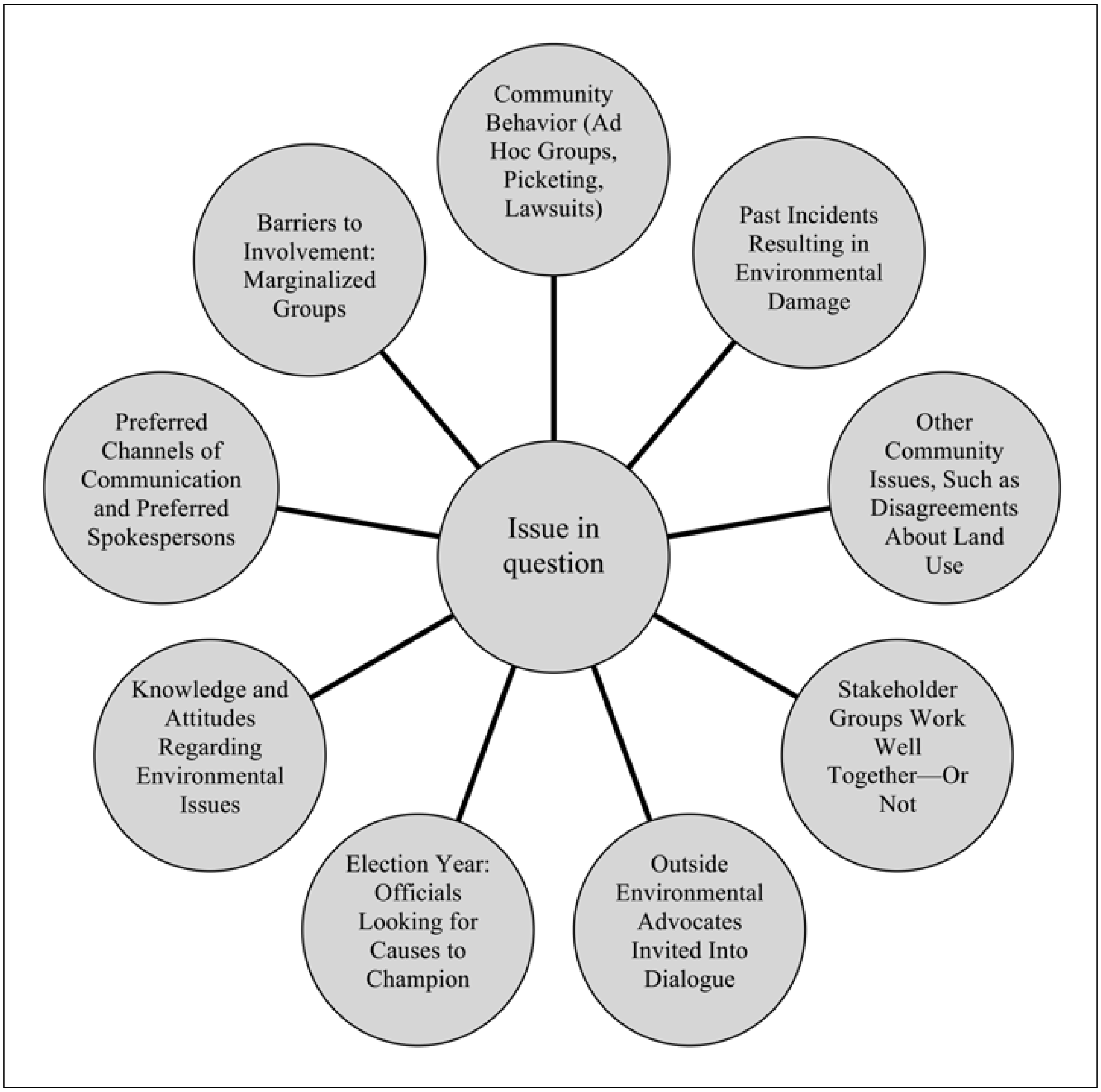
When the author of this article and her associates conduct such assessments, we typically perform several rounds of both interviews and document research. This iterative approach allows us to fine-tune questions, verify facts, and home in on subtle, yet important issues.

Conducting a traditional community assessment is a rigorous process, but it provides vital insights into the *context* within which an environmental project will unfold (see **Exhibit 1** and the sidebar entitled "Context Counts"). No issue exists in a vacuum, and understanding the backdrop against which a project will be viewed helps CR/PI specialists craft programs that account for existing community concerns and predict likely future issues.

Assessment at Long Distance

Approximately ten years ago, we were asked to perform an assessment at a long distance and without conducting personal interviews. This assignment begged the question: Is it possible

Exhibit 1. No Environmental Issue Exists in a Vacuum: Some of the Variables That Can Influence How an Issue Is Viewed or Plays Out



to obtain good information about a community and its stakeholder groups without conducting interviews? And, if so, could we develop a process for conducting documents-only assessments that would reliably provide useful information to our clients?

After conducting approximately ten assessments solely through document review, we

Context Counts: Three Examples

Past Environmental Incidents and Community Frames of Reference

Possessing an awareness of past environmental issues in a community can be extremely important. We invariably see residents and officials using past incidents or situations as their frames of reference when a new issue arises.

For example, consider a community where a major accidental chemical release at a manufacturing facility contaminated a number of facility neighbors' shallow "sand-point" wells several years earlier. If another release occurs at a different facility in the same community, those who have to communicate with the public should anticipate that questions will arise regarding their incident's effect on groundwater.

In many cases, however, communicators may not even know about the previous release if they have not performed a community assessment. As a result, their crisis communication and other messaging could easily miss the mark because they do not recognize the types of concerns that residents and officials are likely to have based on past experiences.

Given the previous incident and its effect on that facility's neighbors, the possible impact of the new release on groundwater (and water wells) is no doubt at the forefront of residents' and officials' concerns. So if the new release is contained quickly and there are no drinking water wells nearby, these are both pieces of information that should be communicated clearly to the public.

Researching past environmental and safety incidents in a community is among the simplest and most straightforward challenges of a documents-only assessment. Most incidents of this type are memorialized in newspaper stories, which typically also spell out the effects of the occurrences (such as contamination of nearby wells).

Tired of Being "Dumped On": Looking Past the Obvious

Some companies make serious mistakes by failing to look past the obvious to seek out underlying attitudes and concerns. For example, we have dealt with several communities that have had histories of environmental problems. In all of these cases, the communities were heavily industrialized, and they were also hosts to the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA)-permitted waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities (TSDFs) and/or sanitary landfills. In several instances, companies made the mistake of assuming that the presence of existing waste facilities meant that the communities would not object to new facilities of the same type.

In every one of these communities, however, the apparent tolerance for "dirty" industry had begun to crack as residents and officials decided that they had had enough of everyone else's pollution. A careful study of area newspapers and municipal meeting minutes indicated that although residents and officials were, for the most part, resigned to living with the existing industry and waste facilities operating within their borders, they were reluctant to accept additional "environmental burdens," especially in the form of TSDFs or landfills.

Newspaper stories in these communities—along with op-eds, statements at meetings, and (in two communities) articles in local environmental advocacy group newsletters—displayed common threads that should have been apparent to perceptive readers: statements making clear that the communities (and their residents) felt stigmatized and "dumped on" by the environmental burdens in their midst. Both sorrow and anger were palpable in these pieces.

In three cases that we are aware of, companies (none of which had initially performed assessments or worked with competent CR/PI specialists) made the mistake of stating that their facilities would "fit right in with everything else you have." In all three cases, the proposed facilities were TSDFs. Understandably, residents and officials in these communities found the company statements both insulting and infuriating.

In two cases, vigorous objections from residents and officials resulted in the companies abandoning their plans and siting their facilities elsewhere. In the third case, the TSDF was ultimately welcomed into the community, but only after a grueling CR/PI program that was based on a recognition of the community's worth and its right to expect the same high environmental standards that many other communities take for granted. The company also agreed to construct the TSDF using all possible safeguards and to make accommodations regarding truck traffic.

The Long Shadow of Labor Strife

Displeasure over environmental issues, such as facility emissions, permitting, or contaminated sites, may be magnified by other, non-environmental issues surrounding a company or government entity. In particular, labor problems, mass layoffs, and plant closings are among the issues most likely to create bitterness on the part of community residents and officials.

Anger typically is directed at the company considered to be responsible or, occasionally, at a government entity. But such emotions can also influence attitudes about other companies and can affect how residents react to the handling of environmental issues.

We have worked in a number of communities that were formerly "company towns" or that once experienced bloody clashes between workers and "company goons." Even though such events may have taken place long ago, they can continue to affect community viewpoints.

Community attitudes toward labor issues and toward "management" tend to show up subtly in day-to-day news stories. They generally are more evident in feature stories or in columns, particularly those devoted to reminiscing about the past. Such attitudes often are most strongly apparent on the Web sites of community, social services, and advocacy groups; in the transcripts of public meetings regarding environmental permitting; and sometimes in the minutes of municipal meetings. Long and acrimonious strikes are the types of events that, even a decade or two later, may receive frequent mention in newspaper stories and on Web sites in pro-union communities—and they can definitely shape attitudes toward all aspects of a facility's operations.

In several cases, clients have benefited from information we have uncovered on local labor issues (such as past labor strife in the community or the involvement of current elected officials in local bargaining-unit activities). This information has proven useful in helping our clients understand and acknowledge past acrimony so that dialogues to address existing environmental issues could be established on a sound footing.

have determined that a good understanding of a community can be obtained by studying publicly available documents accessible via the Internet, as long as sufficient rigor is applied to the process.

When the Documents-Only Approach May Be Preferable—or Necessary

Whenever possible, we still prefer to perform assessments by visiting the community and conducting interviews. However, there are situations in which a client may not want a CR/PI specialist to make contact with community residents or officials. Such situations include cases where:

- senior managers are skittish about making initial contact with residents or officials but they want or need information about the community;
- the project may or may not be a go (for example, a company may be considering the purchase of a facility and its managers want to know whether the facility is, or may become, the focus of community opposition or concern); and
- toxic tort litigation is likely or is already proceeding against a contaminated site or a manufacturing facility, and questioning residents and officials could create problems in the litigation or raise concerns about the client's motives (e.g., it might suggest that the client is seeking to influence potential witnesses). In some particularly contentious cases where litigation is already under way, the presiding judge may issue an order forbidding a company that is being sued from speaking with plaintiffs or potential plaintiffs.

In order to develop an effective CR/PI program, specialists in community relations/public involvement must identify an issue's stakeholders.

The Community Assessment Process

The information we gather for a documents-only assessment is readily available to the public. The trick is to gather it systematically, read it, and analyze it with an eye toward imposing order onto hundreds of random facts and other pieces of information in order to create a profile of the community, its stakeholders, and its collective behaviors.

Over the years, we have developed a series of questions that we ask the people we interview—or ask ourselves during documents-only assessments. **Exhibit 2** includes a list of these questions, annotated to show both the resources we consult for the information and how readily each question can be answered using the documents-only approach.

Identifying Stakeholders

In order to develop an effective CR/PI program, specialists in community relations/public involvement must identify an issue's stakeholders—that is, those who are affected by the issue (or perceive that they are affected) and those who are interested in the issue.

A stakeholders list will include some people who are readily identifiable, such as local officials. These officials, by virtue of their positions, must at the very least receive notifications and be kept in the loop regarding public involvement activities.

It is also relatively easy to search out local environmental and community groups, most of which now have at least a rudimentary presence on the Web. Identifying people or organizations located near a contaminated site or facility can be done using the various directories available on the Internet.

Other individuals or *ad hoc* neighborhood groups may be more difficult to identify. Their names may turn up in newspaper stories published after environmental concerns are raised or through interviews conducted as a follow-up to the documents-only work.

Exhibit 2. Questions for an Assessment*

Question	How Readily Question Can Be Answered Through a Documents-Only Assessment	Resources That Can Provide Information
What are the specific issues directly affecting the facility, site, or project?	In general, readily answered. Some subtle issues may require interviews to clarify.	Newspaper review, environmental and community newsletters and Web sites, blogs, government Web sites, mapping sites.
What are the environmental issues regarding the facility or site (e.g., history of spills, violations, threat to water supply wells, impact on sensitive ecosystems)?	Readily answered.	Same as above.
What are the nonenvironmental issues regarding the facility or site (e.g., labor strife, rezoning, perceived effect on property values, changes in ownership)?	Readily answered.	Same as above.
What are the other environmental concerns or issues in the community?	In general, readily answered. Some subtle issues may require interviews to clarify.	Same as above.
How might these other environmental concerns or issues in the community affect perceptions or actions toward the issue in question?	Answer can be inferred, although interviews may be needed to confirm.	Same as above, with special attention to "mentions" in newspaper stories and environmental and community newsletters.
What are other major issues or concerns in the community?	Readily answered.	Newspaper review, community newsletters and Web sites, blogs, government Web sites.
How might these other major issues affect perceptions or actions toward the issue in question?	Answer can be inferred, although interviews may be needed to confirm.	Newspaper review, community and environmental newsletters and Web sites, blogs.
What units of government have jurisdiction over a facility, site, or project (e.g., municipality, township, county or parish, or federal government agency, such as Department of Defense)?	Readily answered.	Government Web sites.
Do these units of government work together and/or with other stakeholder groups to address environmental issues?	Answer can be inferred.	Newspaper review, government Web sites.
Who are the groups and individuals who are affected by or interested in the issue, or who perceive they are affected by it? What links them to the issue?	In general, readily answered or inferred, although some groups or individuals may not be identifiable solely through a document search.	Newspaper review, environmental and community newsletters, blogs, government Web sites (particularly board or committee meeting minutes, lists of attendees), mapping sites, census data.
Who are the opinion leaders in the community and what roles do these people tend to play in issues involving community concerns?	Readily available/answer may be inferred. (This information can involve subtleties that may require interviews to determine relationships.)	Newspaper review, government newsletters and Web sites, community group newsletters and Web sites.
How do informal leaders interact with formal leaders, including elected and staff officials?	Answer may be inferred, although interviews may be needed to confirm.	Same as above.
How knowledgeable are the various stakeholders about the issue and about the technical and regulatory issues surrounding it?	Answer may SOMETIMES be inferred/No reliable answer.	Newspaper review, environmental group newsletters and Web sites, government newsletters and Web sites, especially meeting minutes.
What are the demographics of the community?	Readily available.	Census data, government Web sites, community group Web sites.
Do the stakeholder groups identified include members of all demographic groups? For example, does the affected or potentially affected neighborhood have a large number of residents who are racial or ethnic minorities or who lack English skills? How best can these people be included in the public involvement process?	Readily available in some cases/answer may be inferred in other cases, although interviews may be needed to confirm.	Census data, newspaper review, social services Web sites, government Web sites, community and environmental group newsletters and Web sites.
What is the history of the community and the stakeholder groups within it, and what does this history suggest regarding community attitudes and behaviors?	Readily available/answer may be inferred, although interviews may be needed to confirm.	Historical society Web sites, government Web sites, newspaper review.

Exhibit 2. Questions for an Assessment* *(continued)*

Question	How Readily Question Can Be Answered Through a Documents-Only Assessment	Resources That Can Provide Information
What are the social and political climate and decision-making dynamics in the community? Is the community's decision-making mode inclusive or noninclusive (e.g., are the various stakeholder groups in the community included or excluded from the power structure that makes decisions in the community)?	Answer may be inferred.	Newspaper review, government newsletters and Web sites, community and environmental group Web sites and newsletters, blogs.
Are some groups essentially disenfranchised from the formal power structure?	Answer may be inferred, although interviews may be needed to confirm.	Same as above.
How do officials, residents, and community organizations tend to respond to "threats" or concerns?	Answer may be inferred.	Same as above.
Do residents turn to elected and staff officials or to other community leaders?	Answer may be inferred, although interviews may be needed to confirm.	Same as above.
Are "outsiders" welcome or invited into community processes?	Answer may be inferred/if the answer is "No," may be readily available.	Same as above.
What is the likely geographic area of concern regarding the facility, site, or project?	No reliable answer/may sometimes be inferred.	Same as above.
What are the most effective channels of communication to reach specific stakeholder groups in the community?	Readily available.	Same as above.
Are there any particular types of public involvement activities that appear to be used in the community (e.g., do people attend meetings, workshops, belong to civic or environmental groups)?	Readily available.	Same as above.
What media coverage has the issue received?	Readily available.	Newspaper review.
What media coverage have other types of environmental stories received?	Readily available.	Newspaper review.
Are there media biases that will have to be taken into account during the execution of the community relations program?	Answer can be inferred in some cases. Easier to infer if several newspapers are covering the community.	Newspaper review, environmental and community newsletters, Web sites, blogs, census records.
Is the facility, site, or project located near residences or "sensitive" land uses (e.g., schools, nursing homes, day care centers, nature preserves, parks, etc.)?	Readily available.	Internet mapping programs, newspaper review.

* Adapted from Forrest, C. J., & Mays, R. H. (1997). The practical guide to environmental community relations. New York: Wiley.

Beyond Simple Identification

Identification of stakeholders should go beyond simply listing names, official titles, or membership in environmental or community organizations. To be useful, your identification of potential stakeholders should include analyses of the issues in which they have been involved, the attitudes and levels of knowledge they have displayed, important alliances that may exist, and the likelihood that particular stakeholders could become involved in a given issue.

Conducting a review of newspaper stories on environmental and other community issues invariably yields names of people and groups who are active locally. Reviewing quotes from them can offer insights into their concerns, attitudes, and levels of knowledge.

Newsletters and Web sites maintained by local environmental and community groups, municipalities, county governments, and key individuals (such as members of planning committees) can also provide important insights into the attitudes, alliances, and actions of local stakeholders.

Understanding Community Issues

On the surface, identifying and understanding community issues may seem relatively straightforward: You can simply type keywords (such as "conflict" or "environmental concerns"), along with the names of facilities or sites, into a newspaper's search engine, and the stories will pop up on your computer screen. A good assessment involves considerably more than this, however.

Analyzing Data

Finding newspaper stories is a good way to start the search, but you must recognize that these stories are essentially "data" rather than true "information." You will need to analyze them (and other documents you find) with an eye toward understanding why people are—or are not—reacting to a given situation in a particular way. How have people responded to other, similar issues? What elements of an issue seem to capture their attention?

As suggested earlier, you should cast your net wide by looking at the Web sites and newsletters of local environmental and community groups. It is also a good idea to review the meeting minutes of relevant municipal and county boards, which often reflect important issues.

Eventually, you will begin to notice patterns of behavior. The names of persons or groups that tend to become involved in local issues, and the types of concerns they express, will begin to surface. As you identify stakeholders, try to analyze the information you are finding. What are the stated concerns of key groups and individuals? What types of concerns that you might expect them to bring up haven't yet been raised?

Following Historical Threads

Understanding the historical context in which local issues are unfolding can be extremely valuable. As CR/PI specialists, we research issues that are specific to our clients. But we also examine other cases within the same community that have given rise to concerns, conflicts, or debate.

Whenever possible, we prefer to follow approximately three to six major cases (both environmental and nonenvironmental) from beginning to end—or from beginning to present day. The closer one looks at such cases and compares them to how other issues have unfolded in a community, the more insights one gains into community stakeholders, how they interact, and how the community as a whole is likely to respond when confronted with a challenge.

Recognizing Community Behavior Patterns

All established communities exhibit specific "templates" of behavior that they employ when they are faced with an issue or concern. Knowing that a community tends to engage in certain behaviors helps CR/PI specialists anticipate community reactions—and take note of those that stray from the norm.

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In addition, knowledge of typical local behavior patterns can be used to design effective CR/PI programs by leveraging existing traditions (such as holding meetings, working with specific stakeholders, and the like).

Common Behavioral Templates

Examples of typical community behaviors one might see include the following:

- creating *ad hoc* groups (often, many of the same people will come together to form single-issue groups as issues emerge);
- looking to existing groups or environmentalists to "lead the charge";
- looking to public officials for answers and assistance;
- inviting outside "experts" or environmental advocacy groups into the community to assist on the issue;

- rejecting the assistance of outside "experts" or environmental advocacy groups that attempt to come into the community to assist with an issue;
- soliciting assistance from state or federal environmental or public health agencies;
- holding meetings for the public to attend (with arrangements made/meetings led by local officials);
- holding meetings for the public to attend (with arrangements made/meetings led by *ad hoc* groups, existing environmental groups, or other opinion leaders, such as clergy and neighborhood association leaders);
- circulating petitions;
- "working" the media (sometimes community residents are particularly savvy in pitching story ideas to reporters to publicize their concerns);
- picketing, marching, and disrupting business; and
- filing lawsuits.

Identifying Communities Where Lawsuits Are Likely

Of these responses, the most difficult to deal with is usually the filing of lawsuits. Organizations responsible for an issue may find that establishing a dialogue can be extremely difficult—or impossible—once a lawsuit is filed. Thus, identifying communities or groups that have a propensity for filing lawsuits is important so that dialogues can be established early. This approach may also help minimize stakeholders' desire for legal action.

The inclusive community offers many opportunities for interested residents to participate in and influence the governing process.

We have found that lawsuits are most common in communities that have the following characteristics:

- a history of serious issues (e.g., plant explosions, contamination of private water wells);
- indifference or hostility to public concerns on the part of local manufacturers, waste handlers, utilities, government agencies, or other entities; and
- a lack of effective processes for dealing with conflicts between industry and residents.

From our experience, once a community has been through the lawsuit cycle and residents have gotten to know an attorney who has confirmed their concerns, they will be more likely to view lawsuits as an appropriate response to environmental issues.

Inclusive and Noninclusive Power Structures

Another important characteristic of a community is whether its power structure is "inclusive" or "noninclusive." These terms indicate the extent to which those governing a community are open to input from people outside their immediate circle. Although communities may contain elements of both approaches among the various units of government and organizations within them, they are typically predominantly one or the other.

The inclusive community offers many opportunities for interested residents to participate in and influence the governing process. Such communities' governments typically have many committees, which include diverse memberships. Response to conflicts or threats often includes the formation of additional *ad hoc* committees to provide input to elected officials, as well as holding public meetings or offering other opportunities for residents to ask questions, give suggestions, or voice concerns.

Truly inclusive communities will not purposely shut out racial or ethnic minority residents or newcomers to the community. However, one may occasionally find a community that appears inclusive, but whose inclusiveness extends only to certain groups (for instance, it may not include new residents or racial or ethnic minorities). These communities are typically governed by long-time residents of a specific race, class, or ethnicity who hold entrenched ideas regarding who should be involved in governance.

Communities with noninclusive power structures typically operate under the old "boss" system, whereby a core group wields most of the power. Input from residents is rarely sought, or else involves "going-through-the-motions" meetings. Deals are made behind closed doors. When committees are formed to study an issue, they tend to include handpicked members whose discussions are confined within dictated parameters.

The lack of meaningful opportunities for input within noninclusive power structures can often radicalize "out" groups. These groups realize that they will not be heard without resorting to tactics such as demonstrations, boycotts, and lawsuits. In addition, residents of such communities are not used to participating in local governance, which means they often lack an understanding of how public involvement programs work. Thus, CR/PI specialists may find that engaging residents of these communities in productive dialogues can require a great deal of work.

Persons who are new to CR/PI may assume that it is easier to work with communities that have noninclusive power structures because they involve fewer points of contact who must be briefed or consulted. In fact, however, it is far easier (albeit labor-intensive) to establish positive, meaningful dialogues within inclusive communities because both the residents and the officials have the skills to give and receive input.

Using Internet Resources for Community Assessment

The following sections discuss the types of resources that typically are available to persons who are performing documents-only community assessments using the Internet. The discussion also notes some limitations associated with commonly available information resources.

Demographic Data

The demographic data of greatest use to CR/PI specialists are gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau. These data can be found at www.census.gov as well as on other Web sites, such as those maintained by states and regional planning organizations. Counties and municipalities—even small towns—often include abstracts of basic census data on their Web sites. Cities and planning organizations often make U.S. Census Bureau data available by neighborhood, which is useful when working on local issues in large population centers.

Although a complete census of the United States is taken only every ten years, the U.S. Census Bureau also collects data from a number of other sources (such as the American Community Survey) between the decennial events, and these data are also available online. Municipalities and other governmental bodies often ask for special censuses if they have undergone significant growth in order to ensure that they qualify for additional government funding.

Municipalities and other governmental bodies often ask for special censuses if they have undergone significant growth in order to ensure that they qualify for additional government funding.

For CR/PI purposes, knowing the racial and ethnic makeup of a community or neighborhood, as well as the number of non-English-speaking residents, is important in the assessment process for two reasons:

- to ensure that racial or ethnic groups aren't excluded from whatever dialogue is established (e.g., if a community is 40-percent black according to census data, but all of the elected officials are white, extra care may be required to reach out to black residents and leaders to ensure good participation and minimize the likelihood of environmental justice claims) and

- to ensure that non-English-speaking groups are identified and accommodated, if necessary, in the CR/PI process. Many city neighborhoods, counties, and towns have enclaves of foreign-speaking residents that people unfamiliar with the area may not be aware of initially. Reviewing census data is often the only way (at least on paper) to learn about the presence of new immigrants who may need foreign-language accommodations.

As a rule, communities with large transient populations tend to have less shared history and cohesiveness than communities in which most people are long-term residents.

The U.S. Census Bureau also provides useful information on levels of educational achievement, which is important to know when preparing fact sheets. In addition, income levels, poverty rates, and age-distribution data can all help CR/PI specialists determine whether the Internet would be a viable tool for communicating information.

Another important piece of information we look at when we are conducting an assessment is the "Housing Characteristics" section of the census. This section includes information on how long residents have lived in their current homes. Such information is vital for several reasons.

As a rule, communities with large transient populations tend to have less shared history and cohesiveness than communities in which most people are long-term residents. Newer residents often have different preferences and employ different channels of communication than long-time residents (for instance, they may not be as likely to subscribe to the local newspaper). As such, newer residents may sometimes comprise their own stakeholder group, separate from long-time residents. Conversely, the influx of new residents into a previously stratified and closely governed community may promote changes that create greater levels of participation for all.

Newspaper and Media Review

Despite predictions about the impending demise of newspapers—a discussion that has been going on for decades—these media workhorses are still among the best sources of information about local issues. Most newspapers, no matter how small, are now available on the Internet, easing the task of conducting remote research.

In the past, in addition to conducting electronic searches of major newspapers' databases, we also physically traveled to libraries in the communities where we were conducting research. We typically would spend a day or two absorbing several months' worth of local news, either leafing through hard copies of back issues or scrolling through reels of microfilm.

This type of review—which places a given issue within the context of other local stories, editorials, and letters to the editor—can provide insight into a community that is difficult to duplicate through an electronic search. This means that researchers have to be creative and cast their nets wide when conducting electronic searches if they are to achieve the flavor that a "hard copy" review can provide.

When conducting an electronic search, try using a variety of keywords and keyword combinations to seek out stories on other issues that might be similar to the one you are researching. This will broaden your understanding of the community and the way its stakeholders behave. In addition, when you are researching major issues, don't forget to search local TV network news Web sites. Most of these sites cache videos of their broadcasts, which can be accessed through keyword searches.

Whenever possible, consult more than one newspaper during your assessment. Most metropolitan areas are covered by a "major metro" daily newspaper as well as by smaller "community" newspapers that may be published daily or weekly. Depending on the newsworthiness of a given story, it may be carried in several newspapers, often with slightly different emphases.

While weekly newspapers tend to cover local events, major metropolitan newspapers, in addition to carrying major news items, often provide "overview" stories, such as profiles of small towns or neighborhoods within their circulation areas. These overview stories can offer useful general insights.

Most metropolitan areas are also covered by weekly or monthly business journals. Reviewing such publications provides a business perspective, as well as the occasional in-depth article on major issues.

Media Bias and "Citizen Journalists"

Even though most journalists strive for objectivity, media biases exist. One of the more problematic biases for our purposes involves newspapers *not* reporting certain kinds of stories.

In some cases we've encountered, a newspaper's publisher has refrained from reporting on incidents or issues that place industry in an unflattering light. Although some clients may be pleased by a lack of reporting on stories that could make them "look bad," other problems (potentially far more serious than bad press) can arise when controversial issues are relegated to rumor mills and blogs.

Another form of media bias that can twist how a story is reported occurs when accounts consistently include quotes only from certain sources, and exclude sources that, considering the issue, should also have been consulted for purposes of balance.

These types of biases are relatively easy to spot if a community is covered by several newspapers. "Missing" stories may also surface in the blogs of the "citizen journalists" that now populate the Web. Care must be taken when reviewing such blogs, however. Despite the usual grumbling about inaccuracies in conventional reporting, most journalists follow professional guidelines regarding the use of sources and attribution of information. The same cannot always be said of bloggers.

In many cases, "missing" stories can also be found on the Web sites of local environmental or community organizations and in the meeting minutes of municipal or county boards.

Government Web Sites and Newsletters

Local government Web sites (municipal and county) can provide a wealth of information, including biographies of elected officials, meeting minutes, and sometimes video of board and committee meetings. They also frequently contain local newsletters, which can provide insights into a community's ongoing goals (e.g., to recruit new businesses, to provide job training, or to assist persons who do not speak English). Pages for environmental or health departments within local Web sites often provide information that might indicate problems the community is experiencing (for example, issues regarding the quality or quantity of drinking water).

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Government Web sites typically include zoning and long-range planning documents that can be accessed through planning departments' pages. Land-use plans can be useful for understanding the likely direction of development in a given area. More importantly, the land-use planning process tends to bring out strong feelings and reveal community factions. Thus, minutes or proceedings from public meetings about land-use planning can provide insights into both environmental concerns and the dynamics among stakeholder groups.

Comparing demographic data to information on government Web sites regarding the persons and groups involved in community governance can also provide an indication of whether (and to what extent) the community and its leadership exhibit racial, ethnic, or class biases. If, for example, Latinos comprise 20 percent of the population but have little or no representation on boards and committees, you may wish to look at how well their views, wants, and needs are represented—especially if a significant number of Latino residents live in the vicinity of the facility or site on which you are working.

It can be useful to review state environmental agency Web sites for information about issues such as contaminated sites, permitting actions, and facilities with violations near the community in question.

Finally, it can be useful to review state environmental agency Web sites for information about issues such as contaminated sites, permitting actions, and facilities with violations near the community in question. If you find evidence of such issues, but some or all are not reflected in newspaper articles or on the Web sites of local units of government or local environmental groups, this begs the question: "Why?" Are residents confident that the state agency and local officials are handling the issues appropriately? Is criticism relegated to blogs and small *ad hoc* organizations? Or is some other community issue dominating the attention of officials and residents to such a degree that environmental concerns have been pushed to the side, at least for the moment?

Community and Environmental Group Web Sites and Newsletters

This category includes a wide array of organizations. Local government Web sites may include links to some of them, such as chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, historical societies, social services organizations, and charitable groups. Others, including civic organizations, often appear on unofficial community Web sites or can be located by conducting a search using the name of the community and "civic," "neighborhood," or "groups."

As is the case with other resources, pay attention to the issues that are mentioned, the people who are involved, and the officials or other formal leaders who have at least some involvement with these nongovernmental organizations. Also take note of any alliances and activities in which these groups are engaged.

Local Blogs

Local blogs tend to fall into three categories:

- fluffy, harmless gossip;
- overblown screeds that are long on opinion and short on facts; and
- thoughtful journaling and commentary about issues of interest to the blogger.

The first category may be useful for learning the names of local residents (for example, members of a neighborhood garden club). The second category may be valuable for identifying rumors. The third category can often provide explanations and "back story" on local issues.

If you have only a limited amount of time to spend on a documents-only assessment, we suggest that you spend the least amount of time on local blogs. If the client later asks you to continue your research or to design and implement a CR/PI program, you can add to your knowledge of the area by visiting these blogs.

Mapping Programs

An essential part of any assessment is identifying land uses and "sensitive receptors" located in the vicinity of the facility or site in question. This work can uncover additional potential stakeholders that have hitherto gone unidentified and unmentioned. Fortunately, the Internet offers Web sites with mapping programs that allow you to see actual aerial views and generate maps showing specific types of land uses (e.g., schools, nursing homes, parks).

Wikipedia and General Web Searches

Wikipedia is extremely useful for obtaining general information and for the links that it provides at the ends of its entries. Wikipedia's entries on municipalities and counties often include an excellent mix of hard information (such as U.S. Census Bureau data, type of government, names of officials, and major industry, transportation, and recreational points), along with interesting historical facts that provide insights into current activities or land uses.

In addition to Wikipedia, we often find articles during general Web searches on local issues. An astonishing number of academic papers (some of which cover sociological, ecological, and environmental studies) can provide information relevant to your research.

Conducting Your Analysis—and Understanding the Pitfalls of a Documents-Only Assessment

By now, readers will realize that conducting a good documents-only assessment is a rigorous process. So far, this article has laid out the types of information you will need, as well as the resources where you can find it. We now consider some of the major points to remember as you analyze the information you have gathered and distill it into useful findings.

Be Thorough, Don't Rush to Conclusions

During a weeklong assessment, we typically spend the first day trying out various search terms and reading general information about the community to get a feel for it, taking only minimal notes and not drawing *any* firm conclusions.

Moving from the general to the specific may seem like an obvious strategy, but some persons new to Internet research on broad topics may attempt to begin drawing conclusions at the same time they are conducting their searches. Experienced CR/PI specialists may be able to draw tentative conclusions within an hour or two of beginning their searches, but they won't attempt to draw hard conclusions until they have read through all of the information they have amassed and performed a thorough analysis.

Moving from the general to the specific may seem like an obvious strategy, but some persons new to Internet research on broad topics may attempt to begin drawing conclusions at the same time they are conducting their searches.

So pace yourself. Read through the articles you pull up, since the details often hold the clues that will lead you to defensible findings. Search on multiple terms and variations of terms, and don't hurry through the citations or look at only the first couple of pages that pop up. Since you are performing research into local issues, the most relevant entries may be buried a number of pages back in the search-engine results.

Recognize the Drawbacks of Using Internet Resources to Judge Community Concerns

The Internet can be an extremely valuable resource for community assessment work. But it can also have some drawbacks, especially when trying to gauge the strength of a community's environmental concerns or the level of residents' knowledge about environmental topics.

■ *Gauging the Strength of Environmental Concerns*

Remember that persons who blog about their concerns and/or attend public meetings typically are more ardent and outspoken than other members of the public. Thus, you should not assume that everyone in the community holds the same opinions as a strident blogger.

In some communities, however, strident activists may in fact be raising concerns or stating opinions that many other residents hold but are too timid to express. Vocal activists who are serving as intermediaries-for-the-people can often be identified during personal interviews with community residents. Interviewees may make statements such as, “She’s a little loud, but she raises some good points.”

Attempts to assess laypersons’ specific concerns and levels of knowledge through their comments on Web sites often fall seriously short of the mark.

It can be significantly more difficult to identify persons who fulfill such roles when you are limited to reviewing documents and cannot conduct interviews. Even a documents-only assessment can provide some important clues, however. For instance, an activist’s affiliations or the sources that seek him or her out for quotes or comments can offer hints as to whether the person is considered a vital “intermediary” for the community or an outspoken crank.

■ *Assessing Residents’ Knowledge of Environmental Technology and Issues*

Attempts to assess laypersons’ specific concerns and levels of knowledge through their comments on Web sites often fall seriously short of the mark. We have found that people frequently have trouble articulating what they actually know about an environmental issue at the very beginning of a conversation and in the types of written comments one might find on a questionnaire or a blog.

This is not because the average person is unintelligent or doesn’t have actual concerns. In most cases, laypersons simply lack knowledge about environmental technology and procedures. Moreover, environmental risk (whether real or assumed) often gives rise to strong emotions that can color people’s comments and perceptions.

Pinpointing the reasons for a resident’s concerns can often take a fair amount of probing on the part of a skilled interviewer. In the give-and-take of one-on-one discussions, however, CR/PI specialists can separate what a layperson knows from erroneous beliefs. This allows the specialist to determine what information the person (and others in the community) will need to be given in order to engage in an informed and productive discussion. With a documents-only assessment, the process is much more difficult.

Don’t Overstate Your Findings

Some consultants assume that research is useless unless they can draw definitive and all-encompassing conclusions from it. But coming to such conclusions is not always possible within the dynamic and nuanced venue of a real-life community. It becomes even more difficult when you must rely on documents alone and cannot talk to residents directly.

Thus, if you are not able to conduct actual interviews with members of a particular local environmental group, you may not be able to say with absolute certainty that the group will demand input into the cleanup of a contaminated site. You will, however, be able to tell your client:

- what the group has done in the past,
- what types of issues it appears to pursue, and
- what other organizations, either governmental or nongovernmental, the group works with.

Such findings can be extremely valuable, especially when supported with specific examples (e.g., "in five of six cases, the group has actively monitored progress on local cleanups by submitting Freedom of Information Act requests to the state environmental agency").

Remember that your research can provide substantially more information than is usually available to clients and can thus help them make better-informed decisions. So don't feel compelled to overstate what you've found. As Exhibit 2 indicates, you are not going to be able to answer all of the questions you might have about a community—but this is also the case with the first iteration of a traditional community assessment.

Once your client has a better understanding of the community from your documents-only assessment, its managers will have a better handle on the challenges and opportunities they are facing. The client can always ask you to delve deeper into the wants, needs, and concerns of community stakeholders (possibly through personal interviews) if additional clarification is desired.

Concluding Thoughts

Community relations/public involvement efforts typically succeed or fail on how well CR/PI specialists and their clients understand the community they are dealing with. A traditional assessment (which includes personal interviews) is the gold standard for gathering information on a community. However, it is not always feasible for CR/PI specialists to travel to the community in question or talk to residents directly.

Fortunately, a documents-only assessment—using resources available on the Internet—can yield valuable information on community behavior, stakeholders, and issues. When done carefully, it can provide information roughly equivalent to that gathered through a traditional assessment. Our experience in conducting both documents-only and traditional assessments indicates that documents-only assessments can, when conducted with sufficient rigor, provide high-quality information.

Carol J. Forrest has more than 21 years of experience in the environmental consulting and management field. She is president of Rose Hill Communications, Inc. (www.rosehillcommunications.com), which specializes in environmental community relations/public involvement and environmental, risk, and crisis communication. She has worked with more than 50 private- and public-sector clients throughout the United States on site investigations, public communication programs, and corporate and facility environmental and safety programs. She holds a master's of management degree from the J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. Forrest coauthored *The Practical Guide to Environmental Community Relations*, published by John Wiley & Sons (1997). She is based in Wheaton, Illinois. She can be reached at caroljforrest@aol.com.