

VoterMedia for Homeowners Associations

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VoterMedia is an enhancement for any voter community, which helps elected leaders to better serve the interests of their community. We have implemented it for the past four years at the University of British Columbia's student union (the Alma Mater Society, or AMS). They find it very beneficial, and are continuing with it going forward. Check out their opinions in the video at votermedia.org/videos/1.

"It's been about four years with the project. I was involved on AMS Council when Mark first came to us, kind of, with this idea, that he really wanted to get off the ground. At the time, we figured, hey, this is a great idea, you know, we'll give it a shot, it's not going to cost that much, it's not a big deal. If it fails, it fails; if it succeeds, it succeeds. And it far surpassed any of anyone's expectations."

-- Alex Loughheed, UBC AMS VP Academic 2008-2009

As a condominium owner and occasional member of council, I can see that homeowners associations face challenges similar to those of student unions, especially apathy and a lack of connection between the council and the community. VoterMedia can help. It works by letting voters allocate community funds to competing blogs, on a community ballot such as votermedia.org/ubc. This motivates the bloggers to work for the community in various ways, including:

- Helping council stay on track by keeping in touch with voters' concerns throughout the year, not just at an annual meeting or election.
- Helping council improve policies to address issues that matter to the community.
- Building a more coherent community; bringing people together to pursue our shared interests in making things function well.
- Enhancing communication and trust between the council and the community. Helping the community understand when the council is acting in the community's interests and when it is not.

Sometimes good policies are hard to understand, and an assessment by someone loyal to voters may be more credible than a notice from council. On the other hand, if a community gets a "bad" council, that will become apparent sooner so corrective action can be taken sooner. Thus with VoterMedia, a council is less likely to get off track in the first place.

"... having those eyes going towards a student voice that's well informed, has been instrumental, not only as a tool for student governments to get their message across, but also as a tool for the student body to get their message across to the student governments."

-- Alex Loughheed, UBC AMS VP Academic 2008-2009

At UBC we see different blogs focusing on different issues. At a homeowners association, I would expect that at least one blogger would review the financial statements and council minutes each month, then post a report on them that highlights the issues that matter (in the blogger's opinion). Others may focus on security, building staff, contractors, the property manager, exercise facilities, parking, landscaping, and the community's social atmosphere. Some may do more than just blog; for example, they could host tea parties (social or political!) if that's what voters want.

I created the website votermedia.org as a free platform for communities to do this. It's a nonprofit project. A community only pays for its bloggers, who are usually members of that community.

I recently suggested implementing VoterMedia in my homeowners association (but have not yet persuaded council to propose it to the owners). Based on our experience at UBC so far, I recommend an annual budget of \$3,650 as a reasonable minimum for trying this out. That's \$10 a day, or \$300 a month that a community would pay its bloggers. This would only be worthwhile for condominiums with at least, say, 100 units. Ours has about 200 units and 400 residents, so it's less than \$10 per resident per year. (UBC students typically budget \$8,000 per year, but they are a larger organization.)

Bloggers would receive their award cheques from the property management company once a month. Competition among bloggers at UBC results in considerable benefit to the community for a relatively small cost, so we could expect similar performance.

We have found that it is neither necessary nor desirable to require people to create a login in order to vote. Generally the only people who vote are those that care about the community, so at UBC the top voted blogs are usually those that serve the community best. A homeowners association should encourage voting by renters, non-resident owners and resident owners, so that the entire community can benefit.

I originally designed VoterMedia to keep management on track at large corporations, but it has yet to be implemented in a corporation. So far, managements have successfully resisted its implementation. But student unions, homeowners associations and other democracies can help us turn the tide.

At votermedia.org it's easy (and free) to create a new page for your voter community. Just email me ([mark\[at\]votermedia.org](mailto:mark[at]votermedia.org)) its name and city, and I'll create a page similar to votermedia.org/classico. Whether or not your association has approved funding, you can start blogging now if you want! Blogging sites like blogger.com and wordpress.com are free, and easy to use. If you create a community blog, email me a link and I'll add it to your community page, so it will start to look more like the UBC page: votermedia.org/ubc.

Votermedia.org automatically calculates and stores % award shares for each blog every day. If/when your community starts funding its blogs, they can let me know their funding budget and daily schedule of awards, e.g. \$10 a day. I put that into our system, and it calculates daily and monthly award totals for each blog, as you can see at votermedia.org/ubc/horserace. No money has to flow through me or votermedia.org. Whoever manages the community's funds can read off the monthly awards at votermedia.org and pay the bloggers directly.

There's plenty more info at votermedia.org, including votermedia.org/about_contact which has my contact information, résumé, and the VoterMedia Advisory Board. Feel free to contact me with questions, ideas etc.

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Q&A:

Isn't there some danger that bloggers, and commenters on the blogs, will harass the council with unpleasant criticism, making people less willing to serve on council?

-- Although anything is possible, our experience at UBC is that criticism is generally constructive. This makes sense because it's not in the voters' interests to undermine a volunteer council that is serving the community reasonably well. Harassment of council happens without VoterMedia anyway. Since VoterMedia seems effective in connecting council with the community, it is likely to

reduce such harassment. The community will be more likely to support council policies, partly because those policies will improve, and partly because the community will understand them better. Those few community members who complain unreasonably will lose credibility in the eyes of the rest of the community, because we will have a better information system. So over time we can expect fewer complaints.

Is this a bad deal for homeowners who never use the internet and so would never read the blogs?

-- Owners who don't read the blogs will still benefit from the improved responsiveness of council to community needs. Those who do read the blogs and vote on them will be helping those who don't.

Would this increase council's workload by requiring them to read all these blogs?

-- I've heard no complaints about that at UBC. If there's a lot of discussion on the blogs, council would not have to read it all. But council needs to keep in touch with the community somehow. The UBC blogs seem to focus community feedback in an intelligent and helpful way. The best way to find out if this will be a problem at a homeowners association is to try it. It's a new tool, and we can all learn how best to use it.

Can council members compete in the blogging competition?

-- I recommend yes, because then voters can choose whether or not to fund councillor-bloggers, so this empowers voters. It's probably best to let the owners vote on this question at an Annual General Meeting, if/when they approve the VoterMedia implementation. (By the way, at UBC it's not unusual for former council members to compete as bloggers, so I would expect to see this at homeowners associations too.)

Isn't it inconsistent and unfair if council members are unpaid volunteers while bloggers get paid by the homeowners association?

-- I agree this seems somewhat inconsistent. But not funding community media may not be the best way to resolve that inconsistency. If we try VoterMedia and see how it serves us, then we may find some better ways to resolve the inconsistency; or we may find that the apparent inconsistency is actually not a practical problem. What matters is whether VoterMedia will help the community function better.

More Q&A at votermedia.org/faqs.