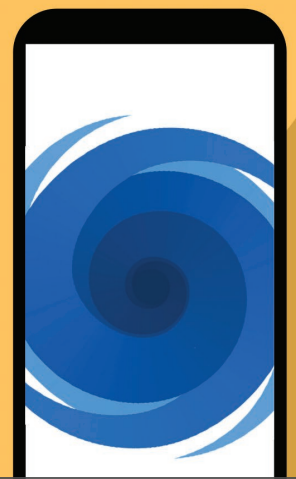
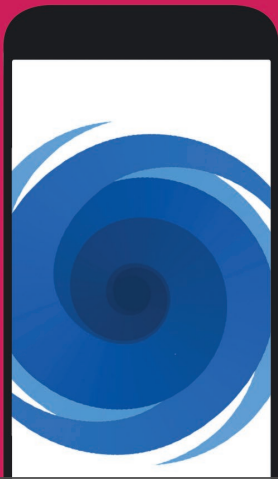


HUNKER DOWN  
A TWEETSTORM IS COMING



# CITIZENS HAVE ALWAYS VOTED WITH THEIR VOICES AND THEIR WALLETS.

# AND IN TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENT, THEY HAVE MORE CONTROL THAN EVER.

Citizens are deploying social media to exercise control and make demands of businesses where they have historically had little to no agency. Through the one-two punch of social media activism and classical boycotting, customers are making it clear where they do and do not align with company values and behaviors. Large organizations, now more than ever, are being taken to task by the customers they serve. And not just on the quality of their services. For example, in Belarus, tens of thousands of families are boycotting state controlled sectors of the economy, including refusing to pay for utility services, after the crackdown on protests following the fraudulent election of President Lukashenko.<sup>1</sup> Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Telegram became the rallying spaces for protesters and opposition supporters in the months following the election.<sup>2</sup>

Vertically integrated utilities or large state agencies may take comfort in thinking they are exempt from this social pressure; however, satisfaction ratings and overall success depend on how well they manage customers' expectations of their brands. Utilities are no longer insulated from the traditional supply and demand model. For the first time in history, customers can exit this model through distributed energy resources (DERs) and innovative electricity delivery models such as community solar, personal solar + storage, or retail choice. Social media activism is literally giving voice to a new generation of consumers who are focused on bringing utilities and other large companies into conversation with them, however reluctantly. In this moment of distributed voices and distributed power, no organization is immune to customer defection.





## **Customers are speaking. We should listen.**

In the last decade, social media activism has become a legitimate vehicle for customer demands.<sup>3</sup> Utilities are seeing more customers speaking up about the utilities' role in climate change and (in)action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Customers want to be heard and feel empowered to be a part of positive change and, as such, are increasingly turning to social media activism via blogging, online organizing, or using Facebook Live, Twitter, or other apps to document injustice in real time.

Citizens and governments have long used economic mechanisms to correct social wrongs. Calls on social media to boycott organizations are the modern-day equivalents of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In a 2019 Vox article, Anne Charity Hudley, professor of linguistics at the University of California Santa Barbara said, "If you don't have the ability to stop something through political means, what you can do is refuse to participate."<sup>4</sup> The public may not have the ability to change systemic issues, but they can organize and create backlash to bring attention to a problem.

## **Activism is at customers' fingertips, just a retweet away.**

So, what is unique about today's environment? Your customers can be moved to action by a single tweet and thousands (if not millions) can join in solidarity within hours. Social media has allowed disparate people to come together over common ideas, lessening geographic, economic, and racial barriers in trying to make change.

In the United States, Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo, Time's Up, and the Black Lives Matter movements have shown the power of social media activism as an engine to drive societal and policy change.

## **Digital natives are your future.**

Within this new dynamic, utilities need to consider the "Digitally Native" people who are starting to make up a larger portion of ratepayers. This new ratepayer base, Generation Z (those born between 1996 - 2010), is the largest generation in American history, is more vocal, and has different values than earlier groups. Young people are very concerned about climate change and know how to use social media activism adeptly.<sup>5,6</sup> A recent Pew study on Twitter demographics found that its users are younger and more liberal than the U.S. population. The same study also found that only 10% of Twitter users create 80% of tweets.<sup>7</sup> And, on Twitter, one tweet can have extreme reach and impact. This means that there are Twitter power users who can quickly drive the conversation and drum up support for an idea that can spark broader social change.

As young people continue to use Twitter and participate in the current utility structure, there is an opportunity for the vocal few to speak out against their utility. To get ahead of this, utilities can use their social media presence and inherent name recognition to engage with these customers on their turf. True listening means giving constituents a voice and empowering them as partners in decision making.

## Dialogue is tweetstorm insurance.

When constituents speak out through formal proceedings, or when utility customers express opinions about an offering online, there is an opportunity for dialogue. But how? In her influential work, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” Sherry Arnstein creates a model to describe the ways constituents can participate in government and how governments can facilitate collaborative governance.<sup>8</sup> For utilities and program administrators, this serves as a useful model for engaging the public around key initiatives and proceedings.

At the bottom of the ladder is non-participation: These are constituents (think: customers/ratepayers) who have no voice or say in decision making. As you move up the ladder, participants are not only listened to but play an active role in policy.

Creating this active space allows for people to feel represented. Moving people up the ladder is difficult and nuanced, but it starts by listening, especially since marginalized communities are muted in most aspects of our society.

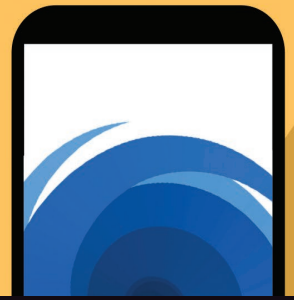
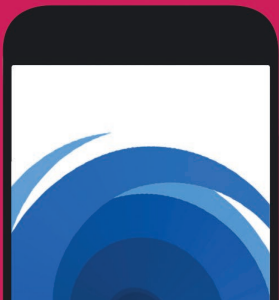
Twitter, and other forms of social media, are venues where marginalized communities can congregate and exercise their right to speak and be heard. Using this space, and allowing these communities to speak in their language, gives them a voice where they have historically been silenced.

As Arnstein says, “In organizations, ‘nobodies’ in several arenas are trying to become ‘somebodies’ with enough power to make the target institutions responsive to their views, aspirations, and needs.” And these somebodies are taking to social media to demand action, which is why it is more important than ever to engage in dialogue with this new generation of utility customers.

## The outsized influence of a viral tweet.

ILLUME recently conducted a sentiment analysis on a southern utility’s Twitter accounts. We found that tweets about utilities were more negative than tweets about solar power; we also found that one viral tweet pulled the overall sentiment score down significantly. Without that tweet in the analysis, the sentiment score was positive.

This illustrates the substantial impact of one tweet. PSMag recently found that Twitter users were more likely to believe a tweet that had more retweets.<sup>9</sup> The negative tweet in our analysis, while just one tweet, may have had broader influence, given its viral status, than all other non-viral utility tweets of 2019.



WANT TO RESPOND TO  
YOUR CUSTOMERS BUT NOT  
SURE HOW TO LISTEN?

HERE IS HOW TO PUT YOUR  
EAR TO THE GROUND.

“ QUANTITATIVE SOCIAL  
LISTENING PROVIDES UTILITIES  
AND COMPANIES WITH DIRECT  
INFORMATION ON WHAT  
THEIR CUSTOMERS ARE  
SAYING.”

### Steps to Conducting a Sentiment Analysis

- 1 Gather resources and customer feedback. We can use tweets from, about, and related to a utility or topic of interest. We have also used news articles and releases about the utility to explore how a utility is seen from different lenses.
- 2 Clean data and prepare it for analysis using standard text cleaning procedures.
- 3 Conduct sentiment analyses to understand general feelings about the utility. Compare different sources and sentiments across time while highlighting different events, and find common themes across mediums.
- 4 Provide insight into what customers are looking for and how they view their utility. This social listening allows utilities to systematically address customer concerns and map them with major events.

# ARNSTEIN'S LADDER: A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

Arnstein's Ladder provides a sequential framework to understand citizen participation and build relationships that are imbued with respect. The eight steps of the ladder are grouped into three sections that outline a developmental process of engagement from **non-participation, to tokenism, to citizen control**.<sup>10</sup> Moving people up the ladder is difficult and nuanced, but it starts by listening, especially since marginalized communities are muted in most aspects of our society.

## Non-participation

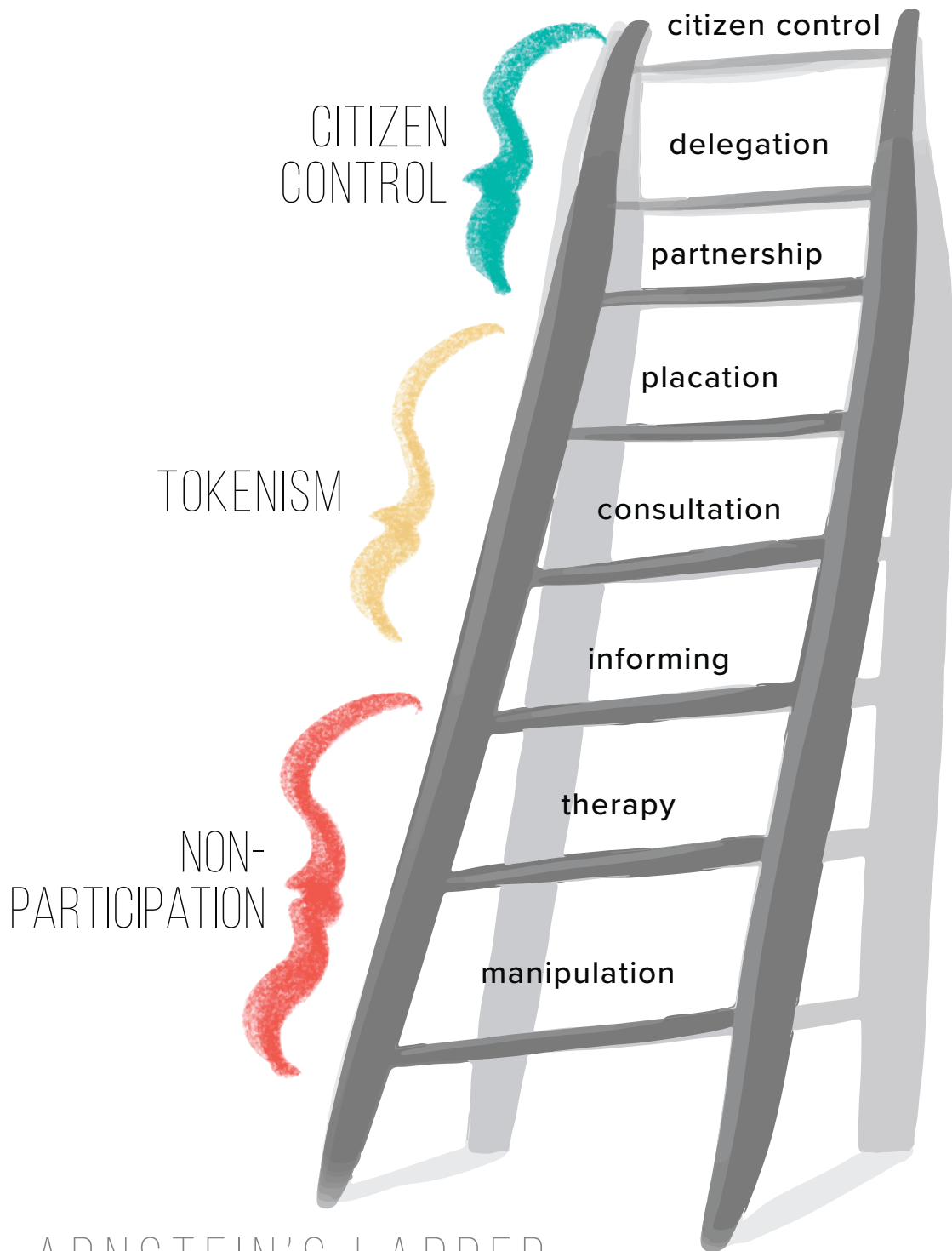
The bottom of the ladder indicates that people have a long climb ahead. **Manipulation** implies a relationship with citizens that misleads them into believing they have agency; interactions are reduced to rubberstamping, or worse. **Therapy** refers to a phase of engagement in which citizens or stakeholder are compared to patients who need to be cured of a pathology. Instead of listening, community members are convinced that their needs are invalid.

## Tokenism

This section of the ladder does not afford much elevation to get a better view. **Informing** is a key part of citizen engagement, yet this step ascribes one-way participation, with no opportunity for individuals to provide feedback. **Consultation** goes one step further, gathering citizen needs via surveys or stakeholder meetings, for example, but engagement is based on surface-level tasks (number of attendees at a meeting, number of survey responses). **Placation** implies the limited ability to influence a process leading to a perception of influence, misleading communities that they have agency.

## Citizen Control

Citizen engagement comes into full view as you reach the top. **Partnership** is when systems fulfill the promise of citizen participation through power-sharing and shared decision making. (Think joint policy boards, planning committees and other bodies with processes to ultimately resolve an impasse). **Delegated Power** allows citizens or stakeholders to not only have a say in a process, but drive it in a somewhat meaningful way. Finally, **Citizen Control** is when citizens have full authority to manage policies or govern institutions. Providing access to public funds for community organizations with control over their allocation is one example of this.



ARNSTEIN'S LADDER

# UTILITY SPOTLIGHT

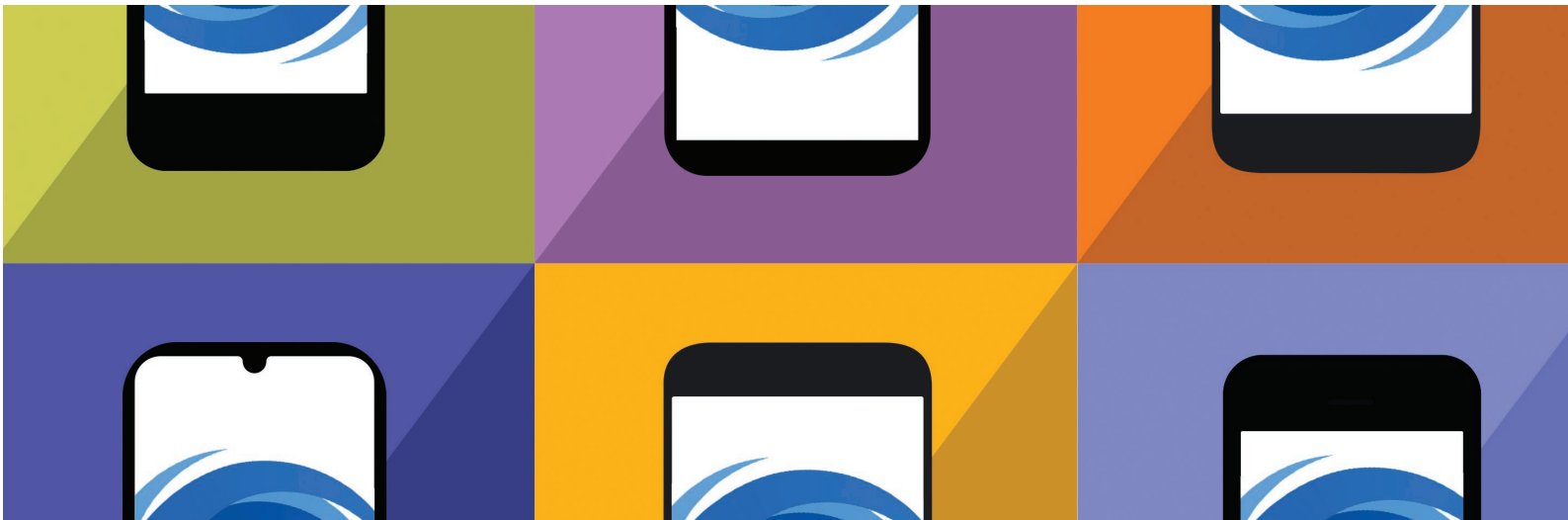
*Xcel Energy, Tucson Electric Power (TEP), and Consumers Energy have listened to their customers and have treated them as partners (moving up on Arnstein's Ladder).*

## CONSUMERS ENERGY

The former CEO of Consumers Energy, Patti Poppe, launched a statewide tour to speak with Michiganders about how the utility could help the state reach an aggressive goal of 90% carbon reduction by 2040. Poppe said, "We're excited to connect with people across Michigan and help them understand the clear and meaningful role they play in Michigan's clean energy future."<sup>11</sup>

### LEARNINGS

This grassroots approach to customer interaction highlights the importance of communication between corporate leaders and customers. How often do we citizens get a chance to speak with those at the top of the hierarchy? This plan allows the utility to hear their customers and humanize their needs. The takeaway here is to think of novel ways to interact with customers beyond a monthly bill.







## XCEL ENERGY

Xcel customers in Colorado expressed frustration with their utility regarding carbon emissions and renewable sources. Municipalities were not only asking for renewable portfolios; cities like Boulder, Denver, Breckenridge, and Pueblo were creating their own means to become 100% renewable. So, Xcel listened. When discussing Xcel's decision to use 100% clean power by 2030, CEO Ben Fowke said, "When your customers are asking for this over and over you really do listen."<sup>12</sup>

### LEARNINGS

While many factors played into Xcel's ability to shift to clean power, this is a striking example of a utility making an expensive decision partially based on their customers' concerns. Xcel listened and changed. They are now considered a leader as more and more utilities are following in their steps and making clean energy commitments.

## TUCSON ELECTRIC POWER

Recently, TEP faced backlash from ratepayer advocacy groups and environmental organizations for their reliance on fossil fuel heavy generation sources and resistance to renewables. But before finalizing their most recent Integrated Resource Plan (IRP), TEP hired scientists from the University of Arizona to find the best and most feasible decarbonization goals for the utility. Using this study and public submissions from the Sierra Club, county officials, and other advocacy groups, TEP filed an IRP with a goal of providing 70% of their power from renewable sources by 2035 and a commitment to reducing carbon emissions by 80%.<sup>13</sup>

### LEARNINGS

TEP listened to their customers and made their IRP more progressive. A key takeaway here is the use of local and third-party stakeholders to research the customer requests. TEP did not assume that they had the best answers. They wanted to ensure paths toward clean energy were feasible and cost-effective. By hiring University of Arizona researchers, TEP infused money into the local economy, got the data they needed to move forward confidently, and validated customer requests and concerns.