

Putting Pen to Paper: Electronic Democracy, Write On!

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Written in May 1996 – Short and sweet.

Imagine a world where the only communication tools are paper and pens. In this society there are only three actors. They are the business-media, the government, and the citizens.

There is plenty of paper to go around. However, only the business- media and the government have pens and therefore the ability to distribute written words. It only takes one a moment to realize who has real power and a voice in agenda setting in this world.

Citizen-based “electronic democracy” is about getting pens to the people.

It is about making the online communication tools for many-to-many civic discussions, organizing, and public involvement widely available. It is based on the belief that open communication and participation is the foundation of democracy. Electronic democracy is also about the important need to prepare people to communicate effectively and responsibly in this interactive medium. The value of citizen exchange and public communication is contingent on each individuals contribution and respect for others and their expression of views. It is where citizens see themselves as active producers of ideas and opinions not just consumers of information.

At this very moment electronic democracy is a part of our “real democracy.” It is not a replacement, however it is changing its nature. It will only thrive and lead to improved democracies across the world if individuals and organizations come together to build shared online “civic participation centers”. An online civic participation center requires a local/regional base that has relevant appeal. Experience shows that long-term individual and organizational commitment and participation must be built one person at a time.

The civic participation center is built through the use of online tools like electronic conferencing and the shared development of civic content through the World-Wide-Web. It represents a third ring of electronic communication that is in part overlapped by the business-media and government rings on either side. The civic participation center gives electronic democracy its citizen-based authenticity and relevancy. Building on the strengths, tools, and content of the other rings, it is where electronic democracy will grow and thrive.

This essay was also available from the G7 Government Online Project’s – Online Support for Democracy sub-project. The fact that it was there for a year is an example of electronic democracy itself.

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Government Information Access Council: Digital Democracy

Citizens' Guide for Government Policy in the Information Age

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

Government Information Access Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Minnesota Government Information Access Council (GIAC) was created in 1994 by the Minnesota State Legislature for the following purposes: to improve public access to government information and, therefore, to improve the democratic process, through the use of information technology; and to help government become more efficient, effective and responsive to the public through the use of information technology.

GIAC is a broadly representative group of 29 members who have met to provide vision and leadership for the tremendously exciting and challenging issues that the "information age" brings to a democracy. The Council embraced input from additional citizen members in their Work Groups, and traveled across the state conducting public meetings to include any interested individual or organization; all to gain inclusion and capture the collective wisdom of the people.

The vision guiding the Government Information Access Council is an ideal of more open government and more participatory citizens. All policy for access to and dissemination of government information and services must revolve around this philosophy; therefore, GIAC recommends that the following vision statement be formally adopted in statute as a guidepost for all future planning: A primary purpose of providing information access is open government.

A series of recommendations and a review of the GIAC basic principles is offered in this report. Although many important issues remain to be resolved, these can form the foundation for action on the part of elected officials and other government decision makers as deliberations proceed on how to enhance Minnesota's position as a leader in quality of life. The tools of technology can and will affect Minnesotans' opportunities, rights and responsibilities. Thoughtful consideration of the guidance, observations and needs of the citizens will serve our state and our country well as leaders establish policies on information technology and applications.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific action is required to move forward in the implementation of the vision. To that end, GIAC has made the following recommendations:

A. Systems Design: All new or redesigned electronic government systems containing public information and services should fully integrate electronic public access to the information and services, and they should be interoperable to the greatest extent possible.

B. Training: Comprehensive training and education programs for all government personnel should be available. Such training should result in government personnel who are knowledgeable about fulfilling obligations and requirements under Minnesota's information policy laws and practices; and are able to use current technologies and technology applications to improve public access to information and services. In addition, incentives should be provided for collaborative efforts to make available comprehensive training and education programs for citizens. The object of this training is to result in citizens who are knowledgeable about their rights under Minnesota's information policy laws and are able to use current technologies and technology applications to access public information and services.

C. Government On-line: North Star should be recognized as Minnesota government's official electronic access point. The State of Minnesota should implement a government information locator and index system that is compatible with established standards for government documents, information and services. The public should be enabled and encouraged to communicate electronically with elected officials, policy makers in government to encourage active citizenship. An on-line clearinghouse that includes service models, best practices, and an index of government on-line activities should be developed through the North Star Project. Local government representatives should be involved in determining what information and services should be provided by local governments, and in establishing a local government model for delivering information and services via North Star.

D. Information Policy Organization and Enforcement: Government units should review current practices to ensure that procedures for public access to public information and services are fully and clearly articulated, whether those procedures involve paper or electronic dissemination. To simplify proper understanding and use, existing government information policy law should be codified into a single chapter or a series of related chapters of Minnesota statute. Alternative methods to the resolution of disputes in a simple and less expensive manner than through the courts, need to be established. A Joint Legislative Commission on Information Policy should be created to assume primary responsibility for the development of uniform public information policy, strip old statutes of the confusing mix of nomenclature, and work with new legislation to ensure consistent language and policy results.

E. Community Access: Additional funding should be made available for the development of technology-supported government information and service projects at the local level. To ensure that citizens in every community have access to public, on-line government information and services, terminals for general public use should be made available during locally determined times at community sites. Comprehensive and ongoing outreach program to inform citizens about information technologies and services should be established to help them realize the potential benefits that information technologies offer to individuals, organizations and communities. Such an outreach program would identify which government organizations serve as the liaisons to support local grass-roots initiatives for developing information technologies and telecommunications infrastructure; and help citizens identify and use various public and private assistance that is available for improving the community's economic development opportunities through the use of technologies. The use of interactive regional teleconferencing, public access channels and public broadcast facilities should be encouraged, with emphasis given to the provision of access to government decision-making.

F. Additional Recommendations: Further recommendations were discussed at length by GIAC, and are also offered in this report. They address collaborative, multi-government efforts to share information; Universal Service; equitable access; the matter of costs associated with getting government information; and the notification of the public as to the public availability of information.

It is the hope of all members of the Government Information Access Council that the publication of Digital Democracy, Minnesota Citizens= Guide for Government Information Policy, provides guidance to elected officials in providing improved public access to government information, improves the democratic process and helps government become more efficient, effective and responsive to the public as it incorporates information technology into the daily conduct of business.

II. GOVERNMENT INFORMATION ACCESS COUNCIL PRINCIPLES

The recommendations that are forwarded in this report are based on the 12 guiding principles that were adopted by GIAC in January 1996. Those principles are:

1. Access to government information is a fundamental right of all citizens in a democracy.
2. Responsive provision of information access and the dissemination of government information are essential functions of government.
3. Public access to government information shall be free, and any charge for copies shall not exceed marginal cost.
4. All citizens, regardless of geographic, physical, cultural, socio-economic status or other barriers, shall have equitable and affordable access to government information.
5. The Minnesota Government Data Practices Act and other information access policy laws must be complied with and enforced at all levels of government.
6. Privacy is a right that must be maintained and protected in the context of changing technology.
7. Government information shall exist in the public domain to the greatest extent possible.
8. Government shall ensure that government employees and citizens have the tools, applications, training and support for electronic access.
9. Interaction among citizens, governments, businesses and organizations shall be promoted through the use of information technology and networks.
10. Citizens shall be enabled and encouraged to be consumers and producers of electronic information and services.
11. The State shall ensure that all citizens of Minnesota have the benefits of Universal Service.

12. Effective competition in telecommunications services in Minnesota is an essential component of effective access and interactive use of government information and services in electronic form.

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IV. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

These are the principles adopted by the Government Information Access Council in 1996.

1. Access to government information is a fundamental right of all citizens in a democracy.

1.1 Citizens can more effectively contribute to democratic, economic and social progress when they can access and use public information without restraint.

1.2 Basic access rights include the equal and timely right to free inspection, to receive copies, and to access and use government information in all forms and media for any legal purpose.

1.3 All Minnesota government data should be presumed to be public unless otherwise classified by statute.

2. Responsive provision of information access and the dissemination of government information are essential functions of government.

2.1 Creating, disseminating and providing access to information is a mission of government units and such activities should be funded by public dollars just as are any other essential government functions.

2.2 Government has a duty to collect and disseminate information to further its public purpose only, not for its economic gain.

2.3 To achieve convenient and cost-effective public access, intergovernmental coordination and organization of information—from creation to preservation—is essential.

2.4 Government units shall support the essential functions of citizen assistance and education, and provision of information locator tools.

2.5 Government shall acknowledge the ATools of Democracy@ as essential for citizens to actively participate in and understand government, and shall make those tools available in various media, including electronically, at no cost to the user.

3. Public access to government information shall be free, and any charge for copies shall not exceed marginal cost.

3.1 Inspection of public data in all media must be available free of charge. Copies shall be available for duplication or electronic transmission for free, or at a cost not to exceed the marginal cost of dissemination.

3.2 Recovery of development costs or generation of revenue from information created or collected with public funds shall not occur without specific statutory authorization.

4. All citizens, regardless of geographic, physical, cultural, socio-economic status or other barriers shall have equitable and affordable access to government information.

4.1 Geographic and economic barriers to access shall be eliminated by making tax incentives and funding mechanisms available to citizens, government jurisdictions, private businesses and especially providers of content, connectivity and site access for linked community-business networks.

4.2 Barriers to information access shall be eliminated in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

4.3 Government information access barriers that are based on language and culture shall be eliminated by implementing, in accordance with federal and state laws, multilingual and multicultural components.

4.4 The State shall ensure equitable and affordable access to government information through a variety of public-private funding mechanisms including tax incentives, low-interest loans, public appropriations, private foundations and charitable contributions.

5. The Minnesota Government Data Practices Act and other information access policy laws must be complied with and enforced at all levels of government.

5.1 Training of government personnel and citizen education regarding the rights granted under access and data practices laws is essential for compliance with those laws.

5.2 Additional non-litigious mechanisms for effective enforcement of the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act and other access laws shall be developed and implemented.

6. Privacy is a right that must be maintained and protected in the context of changing technology.

6.1 The public's right to know should be balanced with individuals, businesses and organizations right to privacy.

6.2 Users of government information shall have a protectable privacy interest.

7. Government information shall exist in the public domain to the greatest extent possible.

7.1 Stewardship of government information, and the value of that information, is a function of government.

7.2 Government shall protect the right of citizens to use public government information for any legal purpose and shall promote the use of public government information to meet public purposes.

7.3 Use of government information should not be constrained by copyright or copyright-like controls except under limited circumstances.

7.4 A government unit may exercise copyright on certain government information pursuant to criteria established by the Legislature.

7.5 In no case should government's exercise of copyright be used to deny public access for inspection or to receive copies of public government information.

8. Government shall ensure that government employees and citizens have the tools, applications, training, and support for electronic access.

8.1 The State shall provide training to government personnel across all levels of government on information access and service technologies, applications and policies which shall be supported by additional state appropriations.

8.2 The State shall establish a variety of outreach and public relations programs statewide to educate and inform citizens on the value and use of emerging information access and service technologies used by the State.

8.3 The State shall provide support to citizens who require assistance accessing government information and services electronically on a twenty-four-hours-per-day, seven-days-per-week basis.

9. Interaction among citizens, governments, businesses and organizations shall be promoted through the use of information technology and networks.

9.1 Government shall accelerate the provision of its services through technology and networks which encourage electronic interaction among citizens, businesses and organizations

9.2 Publicly-supported, statewide electronic access to government information and services through multiple technologies and public access points is essential for information dissemination and efficient delivery of government services.

9.3 A diversity of information sources in the public, private and non-profit sectors should be encouraged to provide the public with access to government information resources.

9.4 The State shall establish timetables for statewide electronic public access to government information and services.

9.5 Government shall support public and private on-line efforts to ensure the development of on-line public spaces for discussion of public issues, civic participation, and problem-solving.

9.6 Government shall increase its use of electronic communication infrastructures and promote their use in the professional work of government staff.

9.7 Demonstration projects and outreach efforts shall be promoted and/or developed by government at all levels.

9.8 Government shall base its investment in the development and provision of electronic services on the long-term economic and social benefits of those investments.

10. Citizens shall be enabled and encouraged to be consumers and producers of electronic information and services.

10.1 State policies should encourage symmetry in the access and dissemination of information.

10.2 State policies shall support individual and community economic vitality through effective and efficient electronic information and services.

10.3 The State shall provide individuals, libraries, educational institutions, non-profits and businesses with tax incentives or other financial assistance to acquire and use equipment, applications, content, infrastructure, training and other tools to stimulate demand for electronic access to government information and services.

10.4 The State should provide libraries and public and private educational institutions with ongoing financial assistance for recurring costs of electronic access to government information and services.

11. The State shall ensure that all citizens of Minnesota have the benefits of Universal Service.

11.1 The Legislature and Administration shall periodically define the specific products, services, and infrastructure requirements which constitute Universal Service.

11.2 The State shall establish a fund to provide Universal Service. Support for such Universal Service Fund should be equitably assessed on all providers of telecommunications services.

12. Effective competition in telecommunications services in Minnesota is an essential component of effective access and interactive use of government information and services in electronic form.

12.1 The State shall continue to adapt its methods and jurisdiction for regulating providers of telecommunications services toward the point where effective competition in telecommunications services ensures reasonable cost telecommunications services throughout the state, and ensures development of telecommunications infrastructure throughout the state.

12.2 Until such time as there is effective competition in telecommunications services throughout the state, the State shall have the legal power and the practical ability, within the construct of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, to intercede in the market so as to avoid or prevent pricing disparities among groups of customers and/or regions of the state, and to ensure development of the telecommunications infrastructure throughout the state.

12.3 At such time as there is effective competition in telecommunications services throughout the state, the State's oversight of the telecommunications services market shall be limited to the extent necessary to ensure Universal Service, interoperability of telecommunications systems, and consumer protection as is provided in other competitive markets.

12.4 The State shall create a formal mechanism to coordinate policy formation and oversight with respect to appropriations, regulatory, and tax policy to ensure continuity and consistency among federal, state and local policies which affect telecommunications services.

Building Citizen-based Electronic Democracy Efforts

This paper was presented to the Internet and Politics: The Modernization of Democracy Through the Electronic Media conference sponsored by the Academy of the Third Millennium in Munich, Germany on Feb. 19-21, 1997.

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Introduction

Over the last century we have witnessed a revolution in communications that has moved much of the public discourse and agenda-setting from the individual and community level to the mass level. As communication technologies and their use by people continues to evolve there are indications that this trend is now reversing with some notable globalization exceptions. With computer-mediated communications, people are reclaiming their communications power from mass institutions. This paper is a concise guide geared toward those who want to build citizen-based efforts that work to ensure that this shift toward many-to-many communication increases the capacity for citizen participation in democracy.

Just as individuals are using the Internet for their own personal interests, so to are traditional political, government, media, and other organizations. Most existing organizations will determine how to use the Internet and electronic communications to represent and further their own interests. Organizations that do not do so within the next few years may not exist a decade from now.

If most of the interests in society "get online," does that mean that democracy will be improved? Will this by default improve citizen participation, public discourse and public problem-solving? In my general opinion, the answer is no, but it doesn't have to be.

I work from the premise that technology is essentially neutral, but that strategic and organized use of information technology and networks by citizen-based efforts will make an important contribution to improved democracy at many levels. As a start, information networks hold the potential to raise awareness about elections and candidate positions, but the ultimate benefit will be a more democratic society. A society where more people are able to hear and listen to each other, have a public voice in agenda setting, and have an increased ability to contribute toward the resolution of public problems.

Citizen-based electronic democracy is about creating the online public spaces for interaction among citizens and organized interests (that are for the most part only focused on using electronic communication to further their own goals.) In a simple sense, we are creating an open and on-going town hall meeting where ideas, agendas, personalities, interests, and beliefs may mix dynamically. We are creating an arena for public expression, development of opinion, and accountability.

This paper presents a concise outline of steps one must take in the establishment and carrying out of a citizen-based online citizen participation project primarily from the Minnesota E-Democracy experience. In traditional terms, this is about creating an online combination of a debate society, voter participation organization, and a public policy group (that all happen to be meeting in the same corner coffee shop at the same time.) The three main sections of the paper are Organization and Mission, Information Infrastructure, and Participation. Much of what is covered will come across as “Organizing 101.” These lessons will help move us from individuals with heady goals toward a global association of individuals and organizations dedicated to building online citizen participation in our own communities, regions, and nations.

Organization and Mission

1. Leaders – An effort to establish a citizen-based organization requires leadership. In the few places around the world where citizen to citizen online political participation efforts have been established or are under development, someone took the initiative to publicly propose the idea. They found people who were interested and made the personal and public commitment to take the public interest and make the idea a reality. The first step is to determine if you are going to be the person to offer leadership where you would like to see a project established. If yes, then think about your strengths and your limits and then seek help by finding others who are interested. Perhaps your role as a leader is to simply propose the idea and gather those interested. If you don't see yourself as a leader, then be ready to offer your help as an active volunteer once someone else publicly proposes an effort (but why wait?).
2. Mission and Outline – Develop a clear and concise mission. This mission should lead off a document with a more detailed outline of the project's ideas, plans, and needs. The outline can then be used to build a base of public interest and awareness through wide distribution. The mission and outline will help develop the needed volunteer base and help others determine what they might bring to the project. Depending upon the reaction and number of interested individuals the effort should be flexible enough to revisit and improve the mission if needed to gain broader consensus and support. Also, while funding might help a project get started, most projects will be started with in-kind donations and support.
3. Geographic Audience Focus – Defining the geographic audience from the start is essential. While the Internet is often referred to as a “global community,” a project geared toward promoting citizen participation in “real” politics needs a geographic focus to become relevant to a broader cross-section of the population. Think of it as the “glocalization” of the Internet. Further, while the culture of a region does vary from place to place, the larger the population and area covered, the more difficult it is to build a sense of place and accountability. The ability to have online discussion participants meet for in-person

events and the realization of publicness versus the (false) sense of anonymity on global forums can help ensure a more relevant and civil exchange. From neighborhoods and townships to cities and regions to states and provinces to nations and international regions, the potential for projects exists. Over the next decade blocks of more local efforts will become the foundation for regional or national efforts, in other cases national or state-wide efforts will lead to local efforts.

4. Neutral on Positions – Key to a successful project is the broad participation of many individuals and organizations. A citizen-based effort requires a non-partisan approach and no formal political positions should be taken by the effort's oversight structure. The main purpose of a citizen-based effort is to bring people together with diverse opinions and backgrounds for electronic interaction and discussion of public issues deemed to be important by the participants. Thousands of political, media, government and commercial organizations are now online. Our challenge is to create public spaces where they can interact. The disappointing application of the Internet in politics thus far has been the lack of adaptation toward interactive communication among different organized interests. Current use has been focused on traditional message control and prompting of protest from their supporters to various levels of representative government or general advocacy/candidate support. While there is nothing inherently wrong with using information technology to put pressure on elective representative bodies, if that is all we use advanced technology for we will simply freeze the process without prompting new avenues for public consensus development.

5. Core Volunteer Group – a core group of 5 to 15 volunteers, depending upon the scope and scale of activities, is all one needs to begin implementing a project. Minnesota E-Democracy, the project I launched in the summer of 1994, currently has around 8 dedicated volunteers with fairly well defined roles and responsibilities. Ensuring that volunteers receive public credit and thanks for their work is very important. Also, in some cases an effort like this might be led by a committee or sub-group of a community network. Involving people active from a mix of political parties, public policy organizations, government, media, non-profits and business sector in the core group will help ensure unbiased project development and increase its credibility. It is important to point out that the Minnesota experience shows the value of formal and informal connection to a variety of groups. As a citizen organization you will have more flexibility than larger institutions. However, you will not always have the resources of a newspaper or established public policy organization for example. If a mix of organizations can take the lead on a project activity as a part of your broader effort it should be seriously considered. I am currently of the opinion that in the end, comprehensive efforts like this require the establishment of new institutions that are "of the Internet" and not simply reconfigured or sub-projects of efforts born of other communication technologies.

6. Focus and Expectations – Keep the project focused on the agreed upon mission and project outline. Never over-hype the project – raised expectations will never be met. Based on the understanding that the technology for online citizen participation exists, the human implementation and use will take years, one should stretch expectations over the long-term. Only expand your efforts in areas where you have the volunteer support to maintain those efforts. Scan the online efforts of other groups in the target area and highlight their good work from your World-Wide-Web service. This will help bring these groups into your efforts and promote "links" back to your online efforts. Starting "small" with election

information and discussions and moving into general citizen participation and public issue discussions has worked well for the Minnesota project. Elections provide a deadline for activity and help a project develop a sense of action and accomplishment.

Information Infrastructure

1. Donated Infrastructure and Collaboration – Work with community networks, educational networks, commercial online services (both content and Internet service providers), and others to develop the technical information infrastructure you need. Minnesota E-Democracy has its WWW pages on the community network called the Twin Cities Free-Net and its major public e-mail list, MN-POLITICS, is hosted by the non-profit, but commercial, Minnesota Regional Network. By clearly identifying your information infrastructure needs you will encourage a bit of “collaborative competition” among groups interested in supporting your effort. Minnesota E-Democracy has received its basic information infrastructure on an in-kind donation basis (for the most part our volunteers are responsible for general infrastructure administration – WWW pages, e-mail list administration, etc.). Now that we have started fundraising from foundations, we are contributing toward the community network for their excellent support. In the fall of 1996 we received WWW support in a crunch from Minnesota Regional Network that allowed us to “virtual host” with the permanent WWW address of: <http://www.e-democracy.org> – Virtual hosting is important because it allows you to move your WWW site if needed.

2. E-Mail and WWW Conferencing for the Core Group – The core volunteer group should be connected through a small working group e-mail address. This helps make our in person meetings much more effective and efficient. When anyone sends e-mail to our “e-democracy@freenet.msp.mn.us” address it actually sends a message to our board members. This allows the group to share in responding to questions and suggestions from others. It is primarily used as an internal project communication tool. The core group should also consider using newer WWW-based conferencing tools for organization and volunteer activities.

3. Announcement E-mail Distribution List – E-mail lists (listservs) are the “heartbeat” of the Minnesota E-Democracy effort. It is essential that a project have a one-way, low volume announcement list that interested people may subscribe their e-mail address to. The “MN-DEMOCRACY” list has over 1000 subscribers. This is a powerful tool for communication of important project updates and solicitation of new volunteers and content needed for the WWW site. Be sure to heavily promote subscriptions to this kind of list from your WWW site and in print materials.

4. World-Wide-Web Site – The primary place people who are online will discover your project is through the WWW. Your site should be well organized and kept up-to-date. Do not disappoint your audience by placing “under construction” signs everywhere. Use the WWW to provide access to the descriptions, subscription processes, and archives of your public e-mail lists. Use the WWW to present “community content” developed by volunteers. a number of your pages will be directory pages that point to other sites and information resources within your citizen participation, politics, and elections focus. Do this well and your site will generate increased traffic. Your project should be accessible to as many people as possible; therefore it is advised that you use standard HTML (3.2 or lower) for formatting your

documents. This will help ensure access for the disabled and through text-only browsers like Lynx that many library systems use. While your “image” and use of graphics is important, use them carefully and be sensitive to the download time of users.

5. “Citizens’ Open Discussion Forum” – Electronic conferencing among participants in interactive forum(s) is very important. This ensures that your project moves from the publishing/broadcast mentality to one that builds online public spaces whose sense of ownership can be assumed by participants. There are three main Internet-based conferencing systems that allow for ongoing discussion – e-mail lists, newsgroups, and WWW-based conferencing. Another system not described here, but worth exploring for special events, like a guest speaker in real time, is chat. Ultimately the user should be able to choose the platform they are most comfortable with, but practical differences in technological implementation lead to different interactive characteristics. Some general comments and reflections are below.

E-mail Lists – An e-mail list allows people to subscribe their e-mail address to a list server which then forwards them e-mail sent to a single e-mail address. Lists typically have descriptions or charters which limit the scope of discussions and some lists are moderated. They tend to work fairly well when well defined and guided, but have limitation when the membership rises over a certain point. (From my experience, open discussion lists with over 1000 (perhaps even 500) people tend to generate a volume of postings that drive people away or are difficult to manage from a technical perspective.) E-mail lists require the most commitment of participants and are “active” in that once you join a list you have to make the decision to unsubscribe in order to leave that “online public space.”

Newsgroups – Newsgroups are the backbone for global topical discussions and information exchange that work through a distributed server system. Newsgroups also exist at national and more local levels. It has been estimated that the per message distribution scale of news makes it the most technically efficient mechanism in terms of network traffic. There are more state and provincial level newsgroups on politics than there are e-mail lists, however, they tend to not be sponsored or promoted in the way that e-mail lists are. It is also less likely that rules and guidelines on posting volumes (unless the group is moderated, which takes extensive volunteer time of a person) exist or would be viewed as acceptable. The GovNews effort (<http://www.govnews.org>) effort may offer newsgroup space for local electronic democracy efforts and organizers to meet. Newsgroups, like WWW-conferencing require a user to go to a conference. Then is a sense newsgroups are “passive,” while the user must be active. Noting that e-mail is the most used online tool, moving strictly to newsgroups would limit your audience. From an organizers perspective “making the sell” once is a lot easier than having to do it every time someone decides to go online. One alternative is to gateway your e-mail lists to newsgroups, but make sure that your rules are available to newsgroup readers who are generally not used to posting limits. Also, the desire to create scores of topical or geographical based “community” or more generalist online discussion spaces will find the economics of news much more to their liking than e-mail lists. Overtime with gatewaying software, hybrid possibilities should be explored.

WWW-Conferencing – The WWW for conferencing is gaining in popularity and dozens of political WWW conferences have emerged at the national and state level. Like newsgroups they offer the reader the ability to access the “discussion thread” of their choice and allow the creation of highly topical discussions with smaller and likely more interested audiences. WWW-conferencing is still in its beginning phases, but the various competing proprietary systems are making rapid improvements. These systems may offer great tools for organizational development and volunteer activities. It may also become the preferred platform for special online events that are organized by citizen-based efforts. The challenge with this form of conferencing is building and keeping audience and commitment of participants to return to a WWW conference. If the commitment is already there, this might be an excellent platform. However, it must be noted that WWW-conferencing requires a continuous connection to the Internet while e-mail and newsgroups allow the person to download messages and read and compose responses off-line.

Minnesota E-Democracy’s Implementation – This project is the most experienced in the use of e-mail lists and is biased in that direction. The “MN-POLITICS” e-mail forum has been the heartbeat of the Minnesota E-Democracy process and has around 400 direct e-mail subscribers. It is the largest state-level politics e-mail list in the United States and averages close to 10 postings a day. Subscribers have the options of receiving messages individually (the default) or through a digested version of the posting sent periodically in one large indexed message. All the postings dating back to the start of the list in August 1994 are archived on the WWW.

It is important that a forum of this nature have a well developed charter and that rules and guidelines be developed over time to ensure that this unmoderated “public space” is of ever increasing value to most of the participants. Having a “list manager” or other project volunteers step in from time to time to guide the discussion back to the forum’s focus is very important. The first two or three months of a list is the most crucial time frame to establish a pattern of successful public conferencing. Our two messages per person per day rule helps keep anyone person from dominating the discussion. It does not censor what someone can say, just how often they can say it. This also helps ensure time for discussions that involve more people before they are taken too far or “into the ground.” In terms of mixing discussion with tips on “hard” information resources, it is also helpful to develop a set of volunteer WWW “hunters” who look for interesting content and WWW site references for distribution on the list.

E-mail forums require commitment and so does civic participation! By subscribing to an e-mail list you are essentially saying, “Come into my home. I am interested in hearing what you have to say.” With a good charter and list guidelines subscribers do have the right to say, however, “I’d rather you not wipe your dirty feet all over my carpets and I am sorry but parts of my house are off-limits.”

In the fall of 1996, through the work of our E-Debate Coordinator, Scott Aikens, we reengaged our MN-DEBATE e-mail list for our second, and the only, U.S. Senate candidate e-mail based debate. In 1994 we held online debates for both the Governor and U.S. Senate candidates. In a sense we created an online stage and structure for a week long debate on three questions with designated rebuttal periods. The debate content was fed into MN-POLITICS for public reaction as well as distributed to a number of high profile media-based online efforts in Minnesota as part of the Minnesota Town Hall 1996 effort. The

debate feed was then threaded into a number of different WWW conferencing systems. Over the last year, Minnesota E-Democracy has floated a proposal for another list called MN-FORUM which would create an similar structure to MN-DEBATE, but likely be issue based for “organized online moments.” Depending upon resources and volunteer capacity this forum may be launched in the next year.

Some important references for more details on these topics include:

MN-POLITICS Description and Archive – <http://freenet.msp.mn.us/govt/e-democracy/mn-politics-archive/>

MN-POLITICS Posting Guideline – <http://freenet.msp.mn.us/govt/e-democracy/mn-politics-archive/guide.html>

Minnesota Town Hall 1996 – MN-DEBATE – <http://www.e-democracy.org/1996/podium.html>

MN-FORUM Proposals – <http://www.freenet.msp.mn.us/govt/e-democracy/issues/forum.html>

6. Public Access Points – “Electronic Democracy” will forever be elitist without some capacity for people without computers or home Internet connections to participate. This paper argues for leveraging of the necessary information infrastructure from various organizations. Along these lines working with libraries, schools, colleges, cafes, and other current or potential public locations of Internet public access points is an important extension. The online content efforts of the commercial and government sectors have a tremendous interest in promoting public access for their own reasons. Work to ensure that your effort is one of the reasons why such access points gain community support (for the most part free to use Internet public access points require public monies to exist.)

Participants

1. Building Audience One Person at a Time – People will be brought into your efforts, either as volunteers or participants in your forums, one person at a time. There is no short-cut to broad participation, so focus on creating a valuable experience for those you are able to bring in the project. The one-way announcement e-mail list will help with the development of an audience of “civic-minded” individuals and organizations. Many of the people who are interested in your project will be new to the Internet and you don’t want to overwhelm them right away with a flood of messages. It is much more likely that an elected official would appreciate project updates, but initially only a few will take the time to follow the open forum discussions. Overall, be strategic and use “traditional” means of outreach to involve key people, organizations, targeted populations, and the general public.

2. Attract People with a Mix of Experience, Backgrounds, and Opinions – The key to Minnesota E-Democracy’s early success was that it involved people with a diverse mix of skills and experiences. We had people with political, academic, organizational, non-profit, public policy, business, and technical backgrounds involved from the start. The project outline identified a set of needs that no one person could ever hold – so when we attracted a good mix of people who were willing to commit time to the project we were able to move forward without wearing out any one volunteer.

3. Develop a Media Strategy – My own quote is that the “Internet has 5 million channels and everything is on.” Build it and they will never come unless you tell them where it is. Currently, the traditional media is the best way to let a population in a specific area know about the project. So write and strategically distribute press releases, collect media e-mail addresses and encourage them to join your announcement e-mail list. When dealing with the media, encourage publication of your general e-mail address, subscription information for the announcement list, the project’s WWW address, and the general open forum’s subscription information. In general under-hype, yes under-hype your project. Letting the reporter decide that your project is newsworthy or some how noble is much better than telling them that it is. In general don’t claim that “citizen-based electronic democracy” is representative or some form of self-selected direct democracy. Instead talk about how you are working to something positive to encourage more purposeful use of the Internet now that more people are going online.

In the end, the real success might be measured in how people begin using the global Internet to come home to their neighborhood or actually getting people out to public meetings (this has happened a number of times on MN-POLITICS where people have reported on meetings they attended). As more and more members of the media have joined our lists to follow our discussions, it has become clear that we have created a new public opinion sphere that has led to a number of topical stories in the traditional media. This has given a number of participants the opportunity to be quoted in the paper or interviewed on the radio.

Conclusion

This is about real democracy. “Electronic democracy” is not some notion of a future state of affairs, it is simply today’s democracy with an infusion of people using information networks and technology to assist their participation in “democracy.” Information technology is changing our current form of democracy. Will it be for the better? We don’t know. Without the development of online “citizen participation centers” across the world, I think the primary direction will be negative. We know that established interests and organizations will use information technology to further their interests. That is how democracy works. But without an open “public space” online, these interests’ use of technology will simply raise the level of noise and conflict in our traditional political institutions and media. With a well established, neutral, online public space perhaps these interests will enter a circle of accountability and public awareness that will enable everyday citizens to become real part of broad public discussions and hopefully part of future solutions.

Democracy is Online – OnTheInternet Magazine – By Steven Clift – 1998

Democracy is Online

The cover article from the Internet Society's March/April 1998 OnTheInternet magazine.

The Internet will save democracy. Or so the early 1990s technohype led many to believe. With each new communication medium comes a wide-eyed view about its potential. I'd like to suggest that just as the television saved democracy, so will the Internet.

Now that I've set a low expectation, anything we do incrementally to improve democracy through the Internet is something we can consider an accomplishment. On my speaking trips, I find that journalists in particular like to ask about voting online. I hear questions about the many commercial Web sites that offer instant polling for people to vent their opinions. In time, many countries will leverage electronic commerce to allow people to vote via their preferred technology. In one scenario, citizens will receive ballots in the mail if they have registered as at-home voters. They would then return the ballot through the mail, or use a Touch-Tone telephone leaving their voice signature, or use the unique information on their ballot to vote via the Internet-leaving their digital signature, of course.

Neither the voting technology nor online polling justifies either one's official use by any government. Their technical existence will not bring about more frequent use of referenda or a more direct democracy. The decision to apply technology in official elections will be a difficult political choice. It will have more to do with how those in power feel it will influence voting outcomes than whether the public wants the option.

We all have different definitions and experiences of democracy. Focusing on the Internet and participatory democracy within the context of representative democracy uncovers some exciting developments. The reality is that our many-and quite different-democracies are changing because of the use of information technology and networks. We don't know whether the changes will be for the better or the worse.

The fundamental question we must ask ourselves is, As democracy and the Internet converge, how must we be involved now in order to improve both? The challenge for us, as citizens, is to be engaged in this process of change. We will be engaged through our existing institutions, be they nonprofits, universities, the media, companies, or governments. We will be involved as individuals and through the creation of new, mediating citizen organizations that are of the Internet, not just on it. Focusing on the part of democracy that happens between election days, we are experiencing a convergence of democratic institutions and processes with the Internet. Democracy is online.

The primary democratic sectors that are flooding the Internet with political information are government, the media, and advocacy and political interest groups. The private sector and others in the information technology industry are developing information and communication tools that are used in this arena. Each sector is making a contribution to democracy online.

Government Online

Government online, as it is called, is making democratic information available like never before. Parliaments, legislatures, city councils, and even neighborhood councils are making available lots of laws and proposed laws, meeting agendas and minutes, elected-official contact information, and other reports. The many chapter authors of the G7 Government Online and Democracy White Paper, of which I serve as coeditor, is a sign that governments around the world are entering a new phase of analysis and action to improve their contribution to democracy online.

Even though systematizing user-friendly and deep access to government information is an important priority, a few interesting exceptions to the one-way model exist. The Moira Shire Council, in the state of Victoria in Australia, uses a public Web board to allow citizens to submit questions for the council to address during its official question time. The council then summarizes the meeting discussion for release online. In Murphysboro, Illinois, a local Internet service provider (ISP) has partnered with the city council to make live audio available, with a corresponding online chat for citizen-to-citizen interaction during council meetings. The government of Canada maintains an index of the online interactive consultations from a number of its agencies. As will be noted later, evolution toward interaction is essential for full realization of the potential of existing and future Internet tools to promote greater public participation in government. Governments, however, do have a special duty to ensure broad access to formal participatory events. So online interactive events geared toward the general public should complement corresponding opportunities that are available to all regardless of their knowledge of or access to the Internet.

Organizing government information-especially laws, rules, and regulations-into a combined pull-and-push system may represent the ultimate online contribution for participation in governance. Citizens could indicate interest in a certain topic area or a specific law and be actively notified whenever changes are proposed. This might work well with larger, more sophisticated legislative information systems. Many serious policy questions will arise: Should the government help those indicating interest in the same topics or proposals become aware of each other? To what extent should a democratic information system serve the interest of those who govern versus those who want to influence how they are governed? And how will the Internet public-access infrastructure in libraries, schools, and other locations be part of a democracy network for broader use that includes some training and assistance?

Media Online

Media efforts, especially those of online newspapers and magazines, have made the largest investment in making content available on the Internet-and it shows. It is likely that they receive most of the public Internet traffic from those seeking news and information on the issues and happenings in their democracies. The major scarcity online from a user perspective is time. From an online business perspective it is attention. With attention come the abilities to promote your content, attract banner advertisements, and create opportunities for commerce. In many places the major virtual navigation pathways are consolidating in major Web index, search sites, and more-local sites often tied to major

media outlets. It is from these pathways that more and more of the public find the essential editorial service that allow the public to quickly digest political news and commentary.

The approaches and contributions of media and major commercial sites to democracy online are incredibly important. How they leverage their audience for their own as well as community partnership efforts puts them in a strong position. For example, the decision to link directly to the full government report within a story encourages deeper understanding, but also sends them away from the media outlet's own site. Another contribution is hosting interaction through Web board discussions on stories and local topics in general. Depending on the resources put into hosting such discussions, some are quite successful and others have had great difficulty with sustained participation.

Since 1996, in places where the Internet is well established, most national elections since have seen major media efforts to make election-oriented news and basic candidate information available. In some sense, the amount of information-especially in more populous nations-is almost too much for the average citizen to wade through. With each election cycle, we will probably see more localization of content and additional media outlets with more niche content. As they say, all politics is local. Overall, it will be interesting to watch the role very local media outlets take as the sizes of local populations online make it commercially viable to place functions of the neighborhood or rural weekly newspaper online.

Advocacy Online

Many advocacy and political interest groups, including political parties, have an online presence. The early adopters rushed online with Web brochures, yet few are kept up-to-date. Some advocacy groups and political parties maintain extensive amounts of information; others take a minimalist public approach. The use of the Internet in organizing and advocating their positions to government and others is more notable. The use of e-mail and of the Internet's many information resources is changing the way these kinds of groups function. Most advocacy applications usually are tied to an in-house champion or dedicated volunteer, and only a few have moved toward a strategic or coordinated approach by an organization as a whole.

From an advocacy perspective, a good Web hit is when someone finds the cause compelling enough to leave an e-mail address for future updates. Some advocacy examples include the Global Internet Liberty Campaign, which provides e-mail updates on a regular basis. Another is the California Voter Foundation, which provided lobbying advice on whom to contact in support of its successful effort to pass laws that would require electronic campaign finance filing and public access. And the Congressional Accountability Project is building support for legislation that would require online public release of U.S. Congressional Research Service via e-mail updates. Of course all of those efforts use the Web to provide ongoing access to important background information and archives of the information they distribute.

We are now seeing the next generation of advocacy efforts migrate from primarily Internet-related advocacy toward sustained general advocacy. One of the more interesting advocacy efforts supporting use of the Internet was Citizens for Local Democracy in Toronto, Canada. While hundreds met regularly in church basement meetings to organize opposition to the province-directed amalgamation of six cities

into a larger Toronto, the online component used e-mail announcements and discussion lists to accelerate information sharing and strategy development.

Tracking those experiences lends support to my feeling that the Internet is an excellent tool for high-energy, short-term opposition efforts. The Internet is more difficult to use over the longer run, when the concerns of a vocal few get amplified to give a sense-perhaps mistaken-of reduced consensus. Overall, I have not experienced an online interactive space that has been successful in generating group consensus on a specific action to be taken. There needs to be a general consensus on positions from the start. I have experienced a number of times when a more detailed understanding of positions and options through online interaction has greatly enhanced and expedited decision making.

The Private Sector and Internet Tools

As I mentioned earlier, the private sector-in particular, the information technology and telecommunications industry and the academic research community-and individuals are developing information and communication tools that provide the infrastructure for democratic use of the Internet. The amazing pace of and competition in development of Internet-savvy applications are based on the business case that someone will pay for some mix of goods, services, experiences, and content. It may be through advertising that much of the content and online experiences are covered. When it comes to democracy online, a good portion of the activity may be sustained through commercial models. If commercial and government activity covers 85 percent of democracy online activity, the challenge will be to leverage those applications for the remainder by means of nonprofits, voluntary associations, and individual use. Acceleration of efforts that leverage electronic commerce and group communication tool developments for public use is an important priority.

In the area of Internet standards, it also is clear that commercial goals are driving the development process. Accepting that this is the engine for development, how might we integrate the needs of communities and democracies? In short, if we can engineer the best technical methods to facilitate electronic commerce, how can we best engineer the Internet to ensure that important aspects of democracy remains upheld and cherished?

With democracy based on the realism of geography, finding ways to tap more-global economic growth in the commercial areas of the Internet for support of local applications will be important. Whether through grants by corporate and other foundations, gifts from individuals, or commerce mechanisms to create electronic versions of bake sales, the opportunity to resource community interest applications presents itself.

Building Civic Life Online

As the sectors of democracy develop and deepen their content-oriented contributions to democracy online, we need to ask, What is missing?

Have you ever seen an elected official stop by an online newspaper's Web board and say, I'll check back once a week and find out what you, my constituents, want? Have you seen a local citizens organization

become established based on discussions that started on a newsgroup? How about competing online media sites that both offer a URL to their related articles on the same e-mail discussion list?

In the last 10 countries I have spoken in, this is where I flip out my circle slides. Imagine, if you will, four slightly overlapping circles representing the positive contribution government, advocacy/political interests, media, and the private sector make to democracy online. Where do those institutions interact with each other online? They don't. Where do citizens publicly interact with them? They don't.

The one-way transfer of content to the Internet has been relatively easy and fairly successful. For the most part, existing democratic institutions use the Internet in their own interest. They must to survive. It is extremely rare for any group to build online efforts-at its own expense-that undermine its influence or to open itself up to greater public scrutiny. This does not mean existing organizations will not interact online-just not if the interactive host is perceived to hold a position counter to their goals or if an interactive online event's success is placed totally on their shoulders. Attempting to host either organized or open, online interaction can be very resource intensive and risky.

Now overlay a fifth circle: the citizen participation center. The interactive center is a politically neutral forum for citizen-to-citizen interaction on important public issues. Such interactive forums, using multiple technologies, will help democracy online come alive around the world. Embracing geography as a vital component of the Internet, real communities using virtual tools will facilitate public communication on issues-starting in our neighborhoods and local communities and going up to regions and states as well as the national level and among people from many nations. Just as we have used the Internet to escape our geography through global forums based on specialized, narrow interests, we are now discovering we can use the same tools to come home to online forums in the common interest. What we need is a generation of online democracy and community home builders.

I work from broad definitions of politics and democracy. Some use the term community networking when referring to local interaction. As the population in any given jurisdiction shrinks, discussions become less ideological and the forum is of more interest to a broader cross section of the population. Online community conversations are more about having focused discussions-in a public commons, hopefully-not about transferring the often irrelevant and harsh style of global political newsgroups into local communities. In some cases, these conversations will influence government and the media, but more often they will influence the participants as citizens and effect how those citizens interact with the broader world.

A hybrid is emerging between the ideals of the global Internet and the corporate intranet: the application of a mix of e-mail lists, newsgroups, the Web, and chat in very public ways among those who are citizens or interested in the happenings of a specific place. The three democracy online interactive projects I am most familiar with are Minnesota E-Democracy, United Kingdom Citizens Online Democracy, and activities of Malaysia.Net. Active sharing of lessons, experiences, and networking through such projects as Democracies Online (see sidebar) provide a foundation for greater citizen participation in democracy through the Internet.

Minnesota E-Democracy: <http://www.e-democracy.org>

Minnesota E-Democracy was established by a dedicated group of volunteers in 1994 in order to promote participation in democracy through the use of information networks. It has received extensive infrastructure support from the Minnesota Regional Network (MRNet) and the Twin Cities Free-Net. I serve as board chair along with a core of up to 10 active volunteers.

In 1994 the project put most of the candidates for governor and U.S. Senate online via the world's first election-oriented Web site; it held the first online debate via e-mail among candidates at that level; and it launched the MN-POLITICS e-mail discussion forum. Today the MN-POLITICS forum stands out as the public commons or citizen participation center. With a total of about 400 direct subscribers maintained over three years, the forum is now part of real politics in Minnesota.

For example, in the past six months the media has picked up a number of stories, the state treasurer announced the day before his press conference that he was not running, an official political action committee was conceived and registered by a group of list members who were against public financing of a baseball stadium, the wife of a candidate for governor in 1998 posted messages in support of that campaign, and the St. Paul City Council president used the list to distribute draft legislation and ask for input. Many of the discussions are fairly abstract, but the focus on Minnesota issues and a participant audience that includes citizens and reaches into most of the power circles in the state make the forum an important open public-opinion sphere.

As in 1996 in another U.S. Senate race, a series of e-debates is planned for the 1998 race for governor. These important events, cosponsored by online media sites and other organizations, position Minnesota E-Democracy as a trusted, neutral host that can increase the value of the democracy online contributions of all of the sectors.

United Kingdom Citizen Online Democracy: <http://www.democracy.org.uk>

UKCOD, an independent, nonpartisan effort, began work well before the national election in the spring of 1997. It hosted a number of topical events on such topics as European monetary union efforts and online delivery of government services, and it held an all-party debate during the election. It developed an online interface that uses e-mail lists as the engine behind a clean, Web-conferencing interface.

In December 1997, the UKCOD launched the world's best example of a partnership involving a national government and online consultation right to the Cabinet Office. The Have Your Say site lets the public provide the government with feedback on the proposals within the Freedom of Information White Paper through February 1998. This project will have a profound impact on possibilities in the rest of Europe in general and throughout the Commonwealth countries in particular.

Malaysia.Net: <http://www.malaysia.net>

The SangKancil mailing list is named after a mythical underdog in Malaysia: a deer mouse that scares away a tiger. Hosted by an ISP owned by a Malaysian national in Sydney, Australia, it illustrates the power of an open forum in an environment with a culturally restrained media. A well-respected journalist-in the same generation as the leaders of the country and who is no longer published in print in

Malaysia or Singapore-writes news stories for over 800 subscribers. They become talking points on the list. Indicating that the posting circulates widely in the government, Malaysia.Net has received messages containing clarifications from high-level officials. With an estimated 90 percent of subscribers in Malaysia, the fact that the servers are in Australia points to the complex cross-border impacts of the Internet.

Another nonpartisan project of note is the recently launched Nova Scotia Electronic Democracy Forum, starting with elections in the spring of 1998 in Nova Scotia, Canada. In addition, Project Vote Smart has provided extensive information on U.S. congressional candidates since 1994. And the Democracy Network based in Los Angeles provided extensive Los Angeles election information in the spring of 1997 and partnered with the League of Women Voters in Seattle and others for local elections there last fall. On recent public-speaking trips to Australia and New Zealand, I found considerable interest in creation of both local forums and national forums there. The University of Swinburne in Australia is working on public forums related to constitutional reform that complement the government's official constitutional convention site quite well. And an Australian Electronic Democracy Project has been proposed, as has a project based in Barcelona, Spain.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most democratizing aspect of the Internet is the ability for people to organize and communicate in groups. It is within the context of electronic free assembly and association that citizens will gain new opportunities for participation and a voice in politics, governance, and society.

In the next decade, those active in developing the Internet and those involved with improving democracy have an opportunity to sow the seeds for democracy online in the next century. Like the founding of any modern nation, the choices made today, the ideals upheld, the rules adopted, and the expectations created will determine the opportunities for democratic engagement for generations to come.

Side Bar:

Democracies Online

The Democracy Online Newswire e-mail announcement list covers the topics covered in this article. Send a message to listserv@tc.umn.edu. In the body of the message, write subscribe do-wire Your Name (Place).

Democracies Online is a new initiative promoting development and sustainability of online civic participation and democracy efforts around the world through experience, outreach, and education. For more information, see <http://www.e-democracy.org/do>.

Sidewalks for Democracy Online – Chapter from Rebooting America – By Steven Clift – 2008

This chapter from the Rebooting America book along with my recent “top ten” article provides an excellent overview of current e-democracy issues and so-called Government 2.0 opportunities. This chapter was commissioned by the Personal Democracy Forum and was the basis of my keynote address at their 2008 conference.

Sidewalks for Democracy Online

Steven L. Clift

“The typical e-government experience is like walking into a barren room with a small glass window, a singular experience to the exclusion of other community members.”

Government websites don’t have sidewalks, newspaper racks, public hearing rooms, hallways or grand assemblies. There are no public forums or meeting places in the heart of representative democracy online.

The question that this essay will ask and answer is not what can we do to redesign democracy for the Internet Age, but, rather, why have we decided to delete democracy from the most visited interface citizens have with “their” government? And what are we going to do about it?

After almost two decades of “e-democracy,” we seem content with simply accelerating online what’s already wrong with politics. We raise money online to support more political television ads, we “democratize” national partisan punditry through blogs aimed at influencing mass media agendas, and whip up outrage through e-advocacy campaigns that fall into the electronic trash cans of Congress. Online news, campaigns, forums, blogs and other online social networks may appear public, but are ultimately privately controlled spaces where only the owner has real freedom.

Representative democracy is based on geography, on people connecting with one another locally to react to and influence government. And yet, rarely does anything truly interactive happen online that enables citizens to jointly solve problems or to get directly involved in efforts to make their communities better. Democratic participation online is having the effect of disconnecting us from our physical place in the world, to our collective demise.

The typical e-government experience is like walking into a barren room with a small glass window, a singular experience to the exclusion of other community members. There is no human face, just a one-way process of paying your taxes, registering for services, browsing the information that the government chooses to share, or leaving a private complaint that is never publicly aired. You have no ability to speak with a person next to you much less address your fellow citizen browsers as a group. As

I've said for years, it is ironic that the best government web-sites are those that collect your taxes, while those that give you a say on how your taxes are spent are the worst or simply do not exist.

That said, around the world and in my hometown, I've seen transformative episodes where the online medium is used to build stronger communities. I've given "e-democracy" speeches to governments (and others) interested in using the Internet to improve democracy and citizen participation across 27 countries. In 1994, I helped create the world's first election information website, E-Democracy.Org. Through these experiences, I've been inspired by a small collection of "democracy builders" who are toiling on the edge of e-politics or dodging the grip of "services first, democracy later" e-government projects. The generational challenge we face in designing democracy to survive (perhaps even thrive) online is to identify the incremental contributions the Internet can make when democratic intent is applied to it and then to make those tools, features, practices, and rights universally accessible to all people in all cities, states, and countries.

Big Ideas for the Next Decade

We know the Internet can connect people with ideas like no medium in history. It can raise voices, share experiences, distribute knowledge, and engage people. The challenge is building a local "anywhere, any time" representative democracy, perhaps paradoxically, through globally shared models and tools.

Government needs the capacity to listen to and engage people online to settle conflicts among the loudest and most powerful voices in society as well as to engage everyday people. We desperately need tools and techniques that provide a counterbalance to the politics of divisiveness and vitriol. We need places for civility and decorum online as all of our public life, particularly politics, substantially moves online.

I am an optimist at heart and every day I try to do something positive for democracy online. So, if I had a million dollars, make that, one hundred million dollars, to invest in the future of democracy online over the next decade, here is what I would do:

1. Make The Internet a Democracy Network by Nature

Because representative democracy is based on geography, content created by citizens must be identified by place instead of simply organized by issue. Content, from a news story to an online comment to a picture or video, needs to automatically be assigned (or "tagged") with a geographic place. In addition, content bounded by a state or region or identified as global will be essential.

New content must be easily searched and aggregated for community-level display. As neighbors gravitate to talk about local issues online, so will our elected representatives tap our public pulse online. To catalyze this idea, I'd work with large open source, user-generated content producing systems such as Drupal, Plone, Joomla, MediaWiki and WordPress. Within months, a new dynamic universe of content and interactivity for us to navigate and connect to by place would exist.

2. Connecting Locally Based on Common Public Interests

In the past fifty years, as shopping malls have privatized the historic public space of Main Street, we've lost something. Today's commercial online social networks do little more than "publicize" private life. Real "public life," be it local, national, or global, needs accessible and useful public places online (be they legally "public" or functionally public with restrictions on censorship or arbitrary control by the legal owner).

Local online news sites connect communities with shared local news experiences. However, almost all online social networking experiences that people have with their friends and family online are about private life. We need to invest significantly in efforts that encourage people to connect locally based on common interests and issues, not just globally based on highly specialized interests. We don't need to build any more echo chambers.

3. Restore and Deepen Access to Representative Democracy and Governance Through New Laws and Online Public Hearings

Let's embrace the ideal of government "of, by and for" the people. Let's seize this Internet moment to build trust in our government through public interactions tied to decision-making as well as through transparency and the active dissemination of information.

We can build "sidewalks," or at least "limited public forums" in legalese, on government websites by authorizing external links to related resources so government websites are not dead-ends. Open meeting and other laws must be changed to require the proactive use of the Internet for information dissemination and notification. I'd fund the creation of open source tools to support "online public hearings." Imagine starting with a standardized online "democratic pulse" (used by all governments) of all public meetings with schedules, agendas, minutes, handouts, and digital recordings. Then add the ability to share your own e-testimony for 48 hours after the in-person meeting. People could then rate or comment on the testimony of others (with civility and decorum requirements) to help us focus our scarce attention time on the most useful submissions.

Taking this a step further, if we really believe in a government that is owned by the people, how can any public information remain offline? While the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) continues to have its place, I predict a fundamental shift: By default, all taxpayer-funded government information from a memo by a township clerk to the town board to ethics filing by Members of Congress, will be available online. Period. That's it. Only legally narrowly defined private or secret information, such as military and national security information, will be offline. Sound fanciful? Estonia already has such a document register in operation. Perhaps a distrust of government power built over 50 years of communism has allowed them to leapfrog our democracy.

4. Restoring the Bonds of Community

When I was a child and my father had cancer, I remember neighbors coming to our assistance in our time of need. Today, with modern life keeping neighbors as strangers, we must use these new tools to break down barriers to community. You deserve the right to easily e-mail your immediate neighbors the morning after you've been burglarized without having to go door-to-door to collect e-mail addresses. We can balance safety and privacy with selective public disclosure of such personal contact information with an intelligent "unlisted to most" directory option that is not the all or nothing of today.

This is big "C" community and small "d" democracy. A collection of better-connected blocks, tied to broader neighborhood and community-wide online efforts will serve as the vibrant foundation we need for accountable and effective representative democracy right up to the Congress and president. You cannot force everyone to be neighborly, but the bonds of community can be restored and nurtured despite dual income families and the assault on time for community involvement.

I am helping build an online neighborhood forum that will soon connect 10% of the households daily (in an area with 10,000 residents) where I live in Minneapolis. Every neighborhood should have an online space (see links to E-Democracy.Org's Issues Forums and projects like Vermont's Front Porch Forum, and the academic i-Neighbors project from E-Democracy.Org/nf). We also need tools that allow people who live within a block of one another to connect many-to-many in secure, semi-public ways. This builds on the simple directory idea above and extends it to support all sorts of exchanges, from babysitting referrals to communicating as a group with city hall about potholes.

Small Actions We Can All Take Today

I have shared some big ideas that will help us make progress over the long term. But what can each one of us do now, today, to restore our democracy?

A. Join or create place-based forums or blogs for your neighborhood or community.

Recruit 100 people, require the use of real names, and open up your own local forum. Learn more at E-Democracy.Org/if. Be sure to give people a choice to participate by e-mail or online.

B. Work with your elected officials to introduce legislation requiring all public meetings to be announced on the Internet. Updating open meeting laws to first require announcements, then agendas, handouts, digital recording, is a good starting point. Learn more at DoWire.Org.

C. Tag the content you produce with geographic terms or "geo tag" if you are technically inclined.

Add geographic tags to the content you share at every opportunity, whether you simply tag your blog post "Minnesota" so it shows up on WordPress.com or tag a video uploaded to YouTube. Learn more from our E-Democracy.Org/voices experiment.

We Have The Power And Obligation To Redesign Democracy

The democratic potential of this new medium has hit the grinder of partisan politics around the world. Too often in politics, the primary engine of innovation is the quest for media attention and power rather

than real openness or a desire for democratic deliberation and engagement. No matter who wins in this 2008 “e-election,” the new president will likely and immediately turn off the interactivity that helped to get them elected. Hopefully I am wrong and we will see White House 2.0 alongside Community 2.0.

About the Author

Steven L. Clift is a Founder and Board Chair of E-Democracy.Org and an Ashoka Fellow. He is also editor of DoWire.Org—the Democracies Online Newswire.