

CHAPTER SEVEN

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY IN A WIRED WORLD

“The Centre will create and maintain a body of ICT and other supporting skills, tools and techniques to facilitate the use of these advanced methods to support the democratic process and governments internationally.

Specifically, its objectives are:

- to promote the application of ICT by governments worldwide in order that elected members and supporting staff can conduct their business more effectively and efficiently;*
- to demonstrate how ICT can contribute to more openness and accessibility in government;*
- to encourage and assist the public, voluntary organisations and business to participate in government through the utilisation of ICT;*
- to conduct research in Teledemocracy to contribute to the academic status of the University;*
- to establish an innovative research environment for members of the Centre.”*

*(Institute of Teledemocracy,
Napier University, Edinburgh, Scotland
<http://www.teledemocracy.org>)*

Introduction

This book has looked at the means by which governments are moving to electronic governance. In this context, governance can be seen as both a means to using new technologies to deliver services to the citizen and ways in which to change and improve the efficient methods of administration within governments themselves. Another element looked at in this publication is also a suggested means as to how governments will increasingly be able to involve citizens in the democratic process of government.

At this stage of development few governments have effectively been able to involve their citizenry electronically in the democratic process. Many governments have been effective dispensers of information, which often

passes as a means of enhancing the democratic process. There are many government initiatives seeking to help citizens to get on-line, seek feedback on government reports on-line, and develop listservs and discussion groups to elicit the views of the citizens. There are also many groups actively participating in on-line activities in the hope of influencing government policies. But for the most part, governments are far behind the activities of citizens on-line around the world, who see the Internet as a medium to foster, enhance and change the way people have traditionally engaged in the democratic process.

The story of the Internet and electronic democracy is a cautionary tale. Much of the enthusiasm and hope for new forms of democracy and citizen input into public issues, sound very like the gushing optimism expressed about the potential of television in its nascent years. It is not yet known if the potentials offered by the Internet will be met. Will the Internet become like television, an arid desert with only a small oasis of excellence? This is an important question because the potential is there for the Internet to become dominated by a few large, corporate interests, or subsumed by government regulation that could inhibit the freedoms offered by this new technology. At the moment the Internet is creating major change. One of these changes is in the ways citizens are engaging in the democratic process and beginning to change the face of democracy.

The Institute of Teledemocracy, quoted above, is just one example of the thousands of initiatives springing up in the on-line world. In the United States and Great Britain governments are looking at setting up on-line voting. The British Electoral Commission recently announced that they would be looking into the feasibility of on-line voting. A similar announcement was made in California in January 2000. February 28, 2000 saw the meeting of the first Internet Voting Technology Alliance in Washington, D.C. Initial participants included: *Safevote*, of San Rafael, California; *VoteHere*, of Kirkland, Washington; *Modulo Security Solutions*, of Rio de Janeiro; *International Foundation for Election Systems*, of Washington, D.C., and *e-Elections*, of Oakland, California. The group met to get public funding for their activities. The group's goal will be, amongst other things, to develop the proper tools and protocols to ensure on-line voting is safe and secure for the citizen and is not subject to corruption or manipulation. But this is a tool for voting under the current system of democracy as we know it. People were able to participate on-line in this opening assembly at HYPERLINK "<http://www.ivta.org>".

Governments, for the most part, are far behind the public in developing tools for electronic democracy. There are some good initiatives, such as the web sites of the British Prime Minister, which seek to garner public comment, opinion and discussion.

There was also an on-line consultation run by the British Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Administration. It was run from mid-November 1999 for one month, in connection with their inquiry into e-democracy and e-government. The on-line discussion centred on "innovations in citizen participation in government". The Committee sent out electronic notices, which were picked up around the world, asking people to send in their experiences in eDemocracy and eGovernance in general.

These are true steps towards electronic democracy. However, on the whole, governments tend simply to provide information on their web sites and use the Internet, and other technologies, to deliver services electronically. The prime example of this is the US White House site (HYPERLINK "<http://www.whitehouse.gov>" which is primarily an information tool and conduit to executive agency web sites. *It was only in January 2000 that President Clinton announced that government had to be interactive with the citizen. What that form will take has yet to be announced.*

The dispensing of information, without substantial input from the citizen, is not a real interactive transaction. Yet, the Internet in and of itself is an interactive medium. Individuals on the Internet understand this and, for growing legions of people, it is becoming a force that is changing the nature of democracy as we know it today.

But this is just part of the wider picture of developments in electronic democracy. In fact, individuals and groups are coming together on-line around the world to influence policy. Politicians are also using the web. In the United States every Presidential candidate has a web site. There are also alternative web sites by interested citizens or groups who want to have their say about the candidates. There are also other groups who are offering sites which will present in-depth analysis of the issues in the upcoming presidential and congressional elections as well as elections at the local and state level. Those wanting to check out the activities of the US Democratic Party or the Republican Party can go to either: HYPERLINK "<http://www.democrats.org>", or HYPERLINK "<http://www.rnc.org>" If you want in-depth details on the 2000 Elections in the USA you can go to: HYPERLINK "<http://www.Politicaljunkie.com>" There are also many independent sites that either oppose the mainstream candidates, satirise the candidates, or

offer alternative in-depth information and analysis of the issues. But the phenomenon of engagement in politics on-line is not restricted to the United States.

There are thousands of other individuals who are active on-line and attempting to either get more information from their government or to influence policy. The on-line world of democratic activism is growing around the world. *This chapter looks at the overall impact this trend in electronic democracy is having both on government and on the citizen.*

The first section of this chapter looks at the emerging trends in electronic democracy, how citizens active on-line are changing the nature of democracy as we have understood it and how governments are going to have to tap into this emerging trend. This section shows the distinction between on-line democracy, and what its participants are achieving, and electronic governance in general.

The following chapter contains an article written by Steven Clift, an On-line Strategies consultant, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the USA. Steve has been actively helping groups around the world to get organised on-line to take part in the political and democratic process. He runs a democracy on-line service, DOWire. He can be reached through his website at: HYPERLINK "<http://www.publicus.net>". From this site you can subscribe to DOWire. Any individual interested in developments of democracy on the Internet or want to get involved should subscribe to this free on-line service.

The Changing Shape of Democracy Today

Introduction

In a virtual world the communicators will be our leaders in the future. The Internet is increasingly playing a major role in our system of democracy. As political and activist groups grow in greater numbers, new leaders will emerge. At the moment the Internet defies any type of classification but it is evident in the on-line activist world that individuals with energy, drive and initiative are helping to propel the new political agenda. This new political reality, *cyberism*, is starting to be felt.

There are currently over 150 million people on-line in Canada and the United States as of January 2000 (NUA surveys – HYPERLINK "<http://www.nua.com>"). It is estimated that by 2002, 60% of the popula-

tion of the United States and Canada will be on-line. These types of numbers means that a certain critical mass is fast approaching that make the on-line world a political force to be understood. The on-line world is no longer composed of mostly highly educated, higher than average education computer savvy computer users but a broad spectrum of society, including many in low income levels. But it is a force to be galvanised in the "click and go" generation. This is no longer an elitist medium. It is ripe for a new populist movement. Arguments may be made that a TV generation who wants dirty political issues (such as the behaviour of their President) to go away can be galvanised into new forms of direct democracy. People in democracies do tend to get upset when governments intrude into their lives (whether rightly or wrongly). Our democratic societies are ripe for political change.

We see threads of this now appearing on the Net. *Political activism and differing forms of electronic democracy are quickly emerging.* With new technologies and the growth of the Internet we are witnessing the rise of *on-line groups dedicated to specific political issues and the electoral process.* This is important for people in government to understand as these new dynamics are going to change not only the political map of governance but also the very nature of government. The citizenry is at the door and, increasingly, they are going to be more involved with the process of government. As an interactive medium the Internet is a natural medium to bring such change. There is so much information on-line and such infinite opportunities to engage the individual that some services of government will soon become redundant. This is not idle speculation but emerging fact.

It can be expected that within the next decade we will see the voters in the United States, for the first time, casting their votes in congressional elections. This is not an unlikely scenario, as can be seen below as governments increasingly look at ways to allow on-line voting over the Internet. The technology to allow secure on-line transactions already exists to allow such voting. There will be many barriers to overcome including ensuring that people who do not vote on-line, or do not have access, also have both the opportunity to vote as well as ensuring the ability to vote is made easier.

In the November 1998 US gubernatorial Election in Minnesota, Reform candidate, Jesse Ventura was elected as governor. Part of his success was his expert use of the Internet to bring voters to buy into his political message. There were many off-line factors at work that got him elected but the creative use of the Net contributed to his upset victory. Essentially, his

organisers recognised that the value of the Internet lay in the ability to use it as a new and effective organisational tool. Its principle success lay in the way the campaigners for Jesse Ventura ensured that the Internet was a tool to be used by the interested citizen to assist in getting their candidate elected. Thus, citizens were able to input information into the campaign on-line as much as the campaign was able to send information out to people in the on-line world.

In France the Internet Society France sponsored an event from March 19 to 25, 2000 called "*Internet Law: Conquering a Global Village.*" It was a "virtual" session which allowed all interested Internet users to assist in the process of revising, drafting and passing a law on governing the Internet. The French Senate was working alongside the Internet Society with the objective of passing a mock law based on use of the Internet. A recent French government report said that existing laws basically covered the Internet but did point out some might need to be modified. This event gives on-line Netizens the opportunity to give their input as to what shape the Internet will take and how existing laws shall be applied. This is one of many "virtual" ongoing events around the world. In the United Kingdom the Government has worked with on-line groups not only to evoke discussions on various policies but also to actively engage citizens in the debate. Increasingly, many on-line events are occurring without the direct (or indirect) input of government.

During 1997 and 1998 public interest groups and non-government groups came together on the Net to actively fight against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) being proposed through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Through the galvanising of world support this MAI was dropped from the agenda and no agreement was signed. It has been referred to the World Trade Organisation for consideration and any agreement may now take years to achieve.

In the United States many groups have been galvanised on the Net to impact on a piece of congressional legislation at either the Federal or State level. Politicians recognise this as a new political force to be reckoned with. In Canada Members of Parliament regularly receive large amounts of e-mail from their constituents or constituents from other ridings. They know that each one has to be answered. The burden to do this is growing. When proposed legislation goes before Parliament on-line discussions ensue. This is a voice politicians are going to have to start listening to. In the past discussions tended to take place between the public service level and academics, public interest groups and experts when legislation or pol-

icy issues were being developed. To a certain extent this controlled the legislative agenda from germination, through the public service level when being developed and the political level (Parliament) when moving towards law. Now there is an uncontrolled element in society, the citizens at large, who will use the mechanism of the Internet to have their say.

These are just a few examples of the legion of on-line activism now emerging. There is not enough space here to articulate the thousands of groups bringing change around the world. Governments are currently contributing to the developing infrastructure, through a diversity of programs such as Connecting Canadians or the Service Canada initiative now emerging to deliver electronic services at all levels of government through integrated systems. But that is all it is – contribution. They are not going to be able to control the results. The Canadian government is to be lauded for their contributions in making Canada a leader in the developing of the on-line world that is benefiting many strata in society. However, the irony in all this is that it is their very contribution that is going to lead to new systems of government and governance making them the instrument of change of their own institutions.

In the past few years it has been fashionable to say that the youth of today will bring the changes of tomorrow as they are growing up with technology as part of their lives. To them technology usage would be as natural a part of their lives as breathing. Such is the dizzying pace of change that technology is bringing to society, that it is now true to say that so much of society has adapted to Internet technologies that the current users of all ages are now contributing to the broad shifts in our society. This impact will be felt in the next few short years. A decade from now we may not recognise the political landscape as it currently exists. An Internet year represents for change what was once a hundred years in the old off-line world. There are many challenges ahead for governments everywhere in the free world.

Democracy in the Wired World

In the wired world the on-line citizen is increasingly playing more and more of a role in the democratic process. There are now hundreds of groups involved, from the community and local level to the national and international stage, in some way working to have an influence on government policies and programs, and on societal issues of our age. Citizens are engaged on-line in citizen to government interaction, citizen to group, group to government interaction and, the most predominant, citizen to cit-

izen engagement on the social, cultural and political issues of the day.

Because of these changes, the process of government will soon no longer be controlled from the top and micro-managed by a few. In the changing wired world citizens are voicing their say. Governments may not necessarily be listening but the thousands upon thousands of people engaging in discourse on the thousand and one issues of the day are certainly listening to each other. This is resulting in powerful currents of change which are only beginning to manifest themselves. The new voices are by no means cohesive as there are so many dissonant voices and disagreements on what exactly on-line activism means. Also, as can be seen when analysing the on-line groups, often many do not know of the existence of others but this could change as groups and individuals with similar interests find each other.

Electronic Commerce (eCommerce) currently dominates the mass media as the main phenomenon of the Internet. But the real story lies in the changes being brought by the thousands of groups and people on-line around the world, who are engaged in some sort of civic activism, political engagement, or just plain discourse and debate on the issues that are important to them.

The most evident manifestation of this was in Seattle in December 1999. The massive protests in Seattle over the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) meetings demonstrated the power of the Internet in bringing people out to express their demands to be part of the process. These people were determined to have their say. Not only did they express their beliefs and ideas but governments were forced to listen. There is some growing awareness in government that their old dynamics of secrecy, closed meetings and invitations of the special few to be part of the process, are starting to fade. In Seattle we saw the first shot fired across the bow of the old world order of democracy as we have known it. What we are witnessing is an emergence from the traditional forms of representative democracy to a new form that has yet to be given a name. For the moment, we can call it cyberism, as an expression of a particular form of politics. But that is still an expression born out of the old paradigm.

The new democracy we see surfacing is more the expression of individual voices that congeal into a collective whole over ideas that the society of peoples on-line develop into a consensus. And while a consensus might be formed on major issues, individual people are still in a position to express their individual thoughts and ideas (even if they range from the erudite to the opinionated). Many groups, such as Minnesota E-

Democracy are very effective at the local level and people quickly buy into local issues. For example, Steven Clift of Democracy On-line Wire (HYPERLINK "<http://www.publicus.net>") gives an example of how he was able to start a city wide debate on the subject of squirrels as a health problem. This spread throughout the community and into the mass media. The subject of squirrels thus became a major subject of on-line discourse because there were so many people who had experiences with squirrels and thought this represented a health problem.⁴¹

In this emerging world we see the evolution of a *true populist democracy*: although people's ideas do not necessarily have to be individually acted upon, the means exist for individuals to freely communicate out to an audience. That audience can be large or small but it represents a freedom for the individual that has not existed up to this point in time. The mass media still hold the reigns of mass communication. It is still important to get that letter to the editor published so you can reach a wide readership. But with this new medium of the Internet you can write something and it will reach the level of interest in the audience out there.

In Seattle, the initial protests were organised off-line and on-line. And it was the Internet that gave this movement the international momentum to make it the effective demonstration and the somewhat collective voice of outsiders it became. It was the clarion call for democracy from voices across the world. It has become the symbol not only for the voices able to speak from the Internet, but of the fact that the citizenry has found the ideal tool by which they can bypass all the normal channels of government. This is not a small development at this stage in our history. Many people talk about the Individual being in control, or having great power because of the ability to tap into the world through the keyboard, but it is not certain if the real power is understood. It has mostly been identified as the power of the consumer to buy the product he wants, or read the on-line newspaper of choice. In fact, what has actually happened is we have collectively opened a Pandora's box of energy, ideas and passion about the things that matter in people's lives. And it really is too early to state exactly all the changes that will occur as a result of this. It can be said with certainty that there is a powerful current of knowledge and ideas now circulating the world.

Another example of an issue that is spreading across the Internet is the announcement in November 1999 of the proposed merger between AOL and Time Warner. Discussions started on-line in the United States and Canada and quickly spread around the world. Anxieties were expressed about the possible ramifications for free speech, censorship, creative free-

dom and diversity, when such a giant conglomerate emerges to dominate the media. As the conversations and rumination on this issue grew around the world, expect this on-line concern surfaced in the mass media. The New York Times (January 14, 2000) has already published an article by Tom Rosenstiel, Director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism in Washington, and Bill Kovach, the curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard. The authors question the whole wisdom of the merger and the ramifications for press freedom in the US. The Independent newsletter in London, England questioned the wisdom of such a merger as has the LA Times. There is a growing anxiety by many that such a merger is going to have very negative impacts on the Internet.

This Time Warner and AOL merger is an example of the bigger story called the Internet. Any idea, piece of information, tidbit or whatever gets put onto the Internet (much of it rumour, opinion or misinformation, it is true, but also much of it is factual) and it spreads like wildfire. In the wired world we have seen time and distance cut to almost zero. The result is that information and knowledge travel almost at the speed of light around the world.

What once took months or years to turn into an issue now can occur in less than a day. This is the true power of the citizen. This is the story of the evolution of a truly populist democracy, an emerging democracy in which issues are being transformed from the hands of the few elite to thousands (and one day will be millions). It is like throwing one seed into the garden and from it a flower grows. Throw the seed of an important idea or issue out onto the Internet and it flowers thousands of times over. This is a key development in our evolution at this point in our history. Central to this development is the degree to which people can communicate, form opinions and judgement, and then act upon them. The Internet is a medium that allows ideas to flow among thousands of channels. People are empowered not because one can get onto the Internet and get a product, read a newspaper or research out some knowledge. That thinking is from an old paradigm succinctly expressed in the saying: knowledge is power. The new paradigm is the ability to talk back (true interactivity), dialogue and go to whatever source an individual wants to choose. This is not to say there are thousands upon thousands of people out there engaged in political activism. There aren't. There are legions of people who are out there ruminating and thinking, or engaging in conversation (or whatever activity one chooses). Many of these people are not restrained by the dictates of mass media which tell us what we must read, what is the story of the day, or what we must listen to on the radio or watch on TV. None of these media afford the independence of operation that the Internet allows.

This is another reason why the Internet is developing into such a strong, world political force not captured by boundaries, time, space or distance. It is true that many in the on-line world still very much reflect their religious beliefs, cultures, ethnic or political bias. But beyond that lies the opportunity to break away from the intellectual and emotional chains of the past and be free as an individual. And this is occurring on the Internet. However, even with these changes, there are still opportunities for governments themselves to benefit from the changes. There are also efforts by many governments, worried about the potential freedoms a medium such as the Internet brings, to curtail both access and content on the Internet.

Because the Internet as a medium is becoming the tool through which the nature of democracy itself is changing and taking new shapes and forms, it is important that governments understand this phenomenon. Increasingly, public officials and elected politicians are going to be faced with not only an informed citizenry but a citizenry that wants to be engaged in the decision making process in some form or another. An analysis of the numerous groups springing up on the Internet on a multitude of issues illustrates that there are voices out there that governments are going to have to tap into.

The Intellectual Capital of the People

The Internet has brought about a decentralization of power. In the wired world, individuals can now make their own choices as to which authorities and information sources they will accept. This is leading to a greater democratisation of knowledge, empowerment of the individual, and the potential for more informed interactions between the citizenry and organisations, including government. Moreover, since individuals now have ready access to a variety of information resources, organisations have to adopt new proactive measures to compile and disseminate information in a competitive information environment.

A citizenry that is able to seek and obtain information and knowledge from any place in the world through the Internet will, in all likelihood, also expect more from government. There is also the opportunity for a paradigm shift in which governments benefit even more from the intellectual capital of the citizenry. In a knowledge-driven economy, the intellectual capital of the citizen could become governments, and society's, most important asset. Knowledge management (KM) principles can be the key to managing this transition and effectively creating this new, inter-

active knowledge-sharing environment.

Application of KM principles will also be necessary if government institutions are to maintain a role as an authoritative source of useful and relevant information. With public perceptions continuously changing due to the empowering nature of communication technologies, new creative and innovative environments will continually evolve on the Internet. Many authors like Andrew Shapiro, the author of the *Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World*, (Perseus Books, 1999) contend that the nature of government and governance will be transformed as a result, driven by the changes technology is creating in society.

In Canada, the federal and provincial governments are moving more and more towards the electronic delivery of integrated services across the country, as evidenced by the federal Government's SERVICE CANADA initiative. The federal government is, at present, the single, largest repository of information. In the knowledge economy it is not going to be enough solely to connect Canadians to the Internet (though it is a major start to make Canadians the most connected people in the world), but more importantly to facilitate the development and usage of information.

The Internet: A Technology of Social Transformation

This is one of the true marvels of interactive technology: the instant ability to spread your unexpurgated words – a piece of yourself, really – to the four corners of the earth. Even in the rush of millennial tidings, the singularity of this achievement cannot be overlooked.⁴²

It is important for governments to understand the relationship between governments and the phenomenon called the Internet because this new medium is dramatically changing the way the individual citizen will interact with governments in the future.

The Internet is a technology of transformation. Each individual user instantly adapts it to his or her own uses. As a result, we are witnessing the emergence of individual identities in cyberspace and unique communities that are independent of time and space. The paradox of the Internet is that it is composed of individuals, all expressing their individualism, who see themselves as an integral part of a collective whole.

Organisations and, in particular, public sector organisations, must adapt to

a new world order of informed citizenry with the ability to establish their own communities of interest, independently seek out global information resources, and form their own distinct views of the world around them. The exposure of the individual to the world of the Internet has profound implications. We are developing citizens of the world. Furthermore, as the cost of Internet access diminishes (both the price of Internet-capable computers and access fees), we can no longer look at people in the old terminology of being "information rich" or "information poor".

In the non-linear world of the Internet, the important thing is not that cyberspace is borderless. It is that people's perceptions of the world are different than any previous time in history. For example, in the recent Kosovo war, the "official" positions of the NATO allies as disseminated through the mass media were counter-balanced with many diffuse voices using web sites, newsgroups, live cameras on the Internet, and Internet Relay Chats (IRCs) to present a contrasting picture of what the war was really all about. This has raised speculation on the Internet and in the mass media about what the influence and role of the mass media might be in the future. Andrew Shapiro has traced the increasing loss of public confidence in America towards the media as well as towards public and private organisations of all types.

According to Shapiro, Americans' confidence in government has fallen precipitously from the 1960s to the 1990s. In 1964, three-quarters of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time. Now only a quarter of Americans say this. Similarly, public confidence in universities has gone from 61 percent to 30 percent; in major companies, from 55 percent to 21 percent; in medicine, from 73 percent to 29 percent; in journalism, from 29 percent to 14 percent.⁴³ As we reach a critical mass of people connected to the Internet, estimated by NUA Surveys in Ireland, ([HYPERLINK "http://www.nua.org"](http://www.nua.org) to be 60% in North America by the year 2002, this is possibly going to result in even more societal change. With an aware, symbiotically connected citizenry, public sector organisations will face an increasing challenge responding to the continually evolving knowledge economy and the sweeping social and cultural shifts that will come with it. Knowledge management could be one of the applicable tools to use in the coming transformation.

However, the true change coming on the Internet is not that which will emerge as a result of government's capacity to tap into the large intellectual capacity of the citizen but the roles the citizen themselves will take in working to influence, shape and form public issues of the day. We as a people are the progenitor and creators of our societies. Never before in

history have we been in such a position to affect so much change. What we are witnessing on the Internet is a new force of change never before witnessed. This is a moment in history that contains a vast potential for political change.

In the next chapter Steven Clift of Democracy On-line looks at some of these shifts in democracy on-line with some specific examples of how groups and individuals are interacting.