

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY ON-LINE

(**Note:** This Chapter is the result of an article-download from **Democracies On-line:** HYPERLINK “<http://www.e-democracy.org/do>” and is reprinted here with the permission of Steven Clift, E-mail: clift@publicus.net, Web: “<http://www.publicus.net>” Telephone: +1.612.822.8667. Some editorial work has been exercised on the original article to conform in style with rest of the chapters).

Introduction

The Internet will save democracy. Or so the early 1990s techno-hype led many to believe. With each new communication medium comes a wide-eyed view about its potential. It is suggested here that just as the television saved democracy, so will the Internet. With the starting point set at a low expectation anything we do incrementally to improve democracy through the Internet is something we can consider an accomplishment. On many of the authors speaking trips, the author finds that journalists in particular like to ask about voting on-line. There are 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 on-line polling justifies 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 non-profits, universities, the media, companies, or governments. We will be involved as individuals and through the creation of new, mediating citizen organisations 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 on-line.

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 on-line.

Government On-line

Government On-line, 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 On-line and Democracy White Paper, of which the author of this chapter serve as co-editor, is a sign that governments around the world are entering a new phase of analysis and action to improve their contribution to democracy on-line.

Even though systematising 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 summarises the meeting discussion for release on-line. In Murphysboro, Illinois, a local Internet service provider (ISP) has partnered with the city council to make live audio available, with a corre-

sponding on-line chat for citizen-to-citizen interaction during council meetings. The government of Canada maintains an index of the on-line interactive consultations from a number of its agencies. As will be noted later, evolution toward interaction is essential for full realisation 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 on-line 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. Organising government information - especially laws, rules, and regulations - into a combined pull-and-push system may represent the ultimate on-line 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: 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 On-line

Media efforts, especially those of on-line 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 on-line from a user perspective is time. From an on-line 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 allows the public to quickly digest political news and commentary.

The approaches and contributions of media and major commercial sites to democracy on-line 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 localisation 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 on-line make it commercially viable to place functions of the neighborhood or rural weekly newspaper on-line.

Advocacy On-line

Many advocacy and political interest groups, including political parties, have an on-line presence. The early adopters rushed on-line 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 organising 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 co-ordinate approach by an organisation 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 on-line public release of US Congressional Research

Service via e-mail updates. 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 organise opposition to the province-directed amalgamation of six cities into a larger Toronto, the on-line component used e-mail announcements and discussion lists to accelerate information sharing and strategy development. Tracking those experiences lends support to the 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, the author has not experienced an on-line 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. A more detailed understanding of positions and options through on-line interaction has been experienced a number of times to greatly enhance and expedite decision making.

The Private Sector and Internet Tools

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 on-line experiences are covered. When it comes to democracy on-line, a good portion of the activity may be sustained through commercial models. If commercial and government activity covers 85 percent of democracy on-line activity, the challenge will be to leverage those applications for the remainder by means of non-profits, 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 is also 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 On-line

As the sectors of democracy develop and deepen their content-oriented contributions to democracy on-line, we need to ask, What is missing? Have you ever seen an elected official stop by an on-line 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 organisation become established based on discussions that started on a newsgroup? How about competing on-line media sites that both offer a URL to their related articles on the same e-mail discussion list? In the last 10 countries in which the author has undertaken talking assignments this is where a number of questions became relevant. Imagine, if you will, four slightly overlapping circles representing the positive contribution government, advocacy/political interests, media, and the private sector make to democracy on-line. Where do those institutions interact with each other on-line? 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 on-line efforts - at its own expense - that undermine its influence or to open itself up to greater public scrutiny. This does not mean existing organisations will not interact on-line - just not if the interactive host is perceived to hold a position counter to their goals or if an interactive on-line event's success is placed totally on their shoulders. Attempting to host either organised or open, on-line interaction can be very resource intensive and risky. Now overlay a fifth circle: the citizen participation centre. The interactive centre is a politically neutral

forum for citizen-to-citizen interaction on important public issues. Such interactive forums, using multiple technologies, will help democracy on-line 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 neighbourhoods 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 specialised, narrow interests, we are now discovering we can use the same tools to come home to on-line forums in the common interest. What we need is a generation of on-line democracy and community home builders. This derives 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. On-line 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 on-line interactive projects the author is most familiar with are **Minnesota E-Democracy**, **United Kingdom Citizens On-line Democracy**, and activities of **Malaysia.Net**. Active sharing of lessons, experiences, and networking through such projects as Democracies On-line provide a foundation for greater citizen participation in democracy through the Internet.

Minnesota eDemocracy: <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*. In 1994 the project put most of the candidates for governor and US Senate on-line via the world's first election-oriented Web site; it held the first on-line 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 centre. With a total of about 400 direct subscribers maintained over three years, the forum is now part of real politics in Minnesota. To date, for example, the media is known to have 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 US Senate race, a series of e-debates were planned for the 1998 race for governor. These important events, co-sponsored by on-line media sites and other organisations, position Minnesota E-Democracy as a trusted, neutral host that can increase the value of the democracy on-line contributions of all of the sectors.

United Kingdom Citizen On-line 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 on-line delivery of government services, and it held an all-party debate during the election. It developed an on-line 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 on-line 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 is envisaged to 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.

Other Democracy Forums

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 US 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, the author 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 democratising aspect of the Internet is the ability for people to organise 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 on-line 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.⁴⁴