

'If they come they will build it': Managing and Building e-Democracy from the Ground Up

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Abstract

The possibilities for using online media to promote deliberative democracy and enhance civic participation have been identified by many. At the same time, the 'e-democracy score card' is decidedly mixed, with the tendency of established institutions in both government and the mainstream media to promote a 'push' model of communication and information provision, which fails to adapt to the decentralized, networked, interactive and many-to-many forms of communication enabled by the Internet. This paper will discuss the experience of the National Forum, which is building an Australian e-Democracy site of which www.onlineopinion.com.au is the first stage. It aims to be a combination of town-square, shopping centre of ideas, and producers' co-operative which will allow citizens, talkers, agitators, researchers and legislators to interact with each other individually and through their organisations. Its aim will be to facilitate conversations, and where required, action. This project can be understood from a myriad of angles. At one level it is an open source journalism project, at another it deals with knowledge management. It can also be approached as a forum, an archive, an internet marketing initiative and an eCommerce resource for civil society. Central to the project is the development of feedback mechanisms so that participants can better understand the debates and where they stand in them as well as gauging the mood, desires and interests of the nation on a continuous basis. This paper deals with the practice, theories and economic models underlying the project, and considers the contribution of such sites to community formation and the development of social capital.

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Introduction

The possibility of greatly enhancing democratic participation with political decision-making through digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been identified by many since the mid-1990s. However, to date the promise has been greater than the performance. This paper examines the theory and then looks at the underlying philosophies and economic model of one successful Australian e-Democracy experiment: National Forum.

E-Government Initiatives and the E-Democracy Score Card

The possibility of greatly enhancing democratic participation with political decision-making through digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been identified by many since the mid-1990s. The Internet presented itself as a social innovation on the scale of the Gutenberg press and the development of moveable type in the 15th century, but with the added feature of being an interactive or conversational medium, and not simply one-way communication such as print or broadcast. It could be described as 'insubordinate type', or the medium – through its millions of users worldwide – that talked back to authors and publishers. Terms such as the 'digerati', the 'Netizens' and the 'Digital Nation' have been used to describe those citizens who have identified the possibility of engaging in new forms of politics that bypass traditional media and political gatekeepers and use ICTs for a more direct engagement with decisions which affect their lives (e.g. Katz 1997). An Australian parliamentary study into the use of the Internet by political organisations saw the Internet as being able to enhance political communication to the point where 'Ideally, it could enable billions of people worldwide, enhanced opportunities to speak, publish, assemble, and educate themselves about issues' (Williams 1998, 5).

The factors commonly cited as enabling ICTs to be a force for broadening and deepening democracy have been identified by a range of authors (Bryan *et. al.* 1998; Hague and Loader 1999; Clift 2000; Blumler and Coleman 2001; Simon *et. al.* 2002), and include:

1. The scope for horizontal or peer-to-peer communication, as distinct from vertical or top-down communication;
2. The capacity for users to access, share and verify information from a wide range of global sources;
3. The lack of governmental controls over the Internet as a global communications medium, as compared to more territorially based media;
4. The ability to form virtual communities, or online communities of interest, that are unconstrained by geography;
5. The capacity to disseminate opinions, debate and deliberate upon current issues, and to challenge professional and official positions;
6. The potential for *political disintermediation*, or communication that is not filtered by political organisations, 'spin doctors', or the established news media.

In terms of the demand to reinvigorate political communication and participation, the Internet emerged at a good time. Such an interactive, diversified and inclusive medium was popularised globally at a time when political analysts, governments and political organisations, and public policy-makers were identifying three distinct but related problems with politics-as-usual. The first was the widely-discussed *crisis of democracy*, marked on the one hand by the difficulties faced by national governments in managing the economy and society in the context of globalisation and cultural pluralism, and on the other by the crisis of credibility of existing political institutions, as the political process appeared increasingly captured by 'money politics', special interests, technocratic logic and media spectacle (Castells 1998; Giddens 1998). As Coleman and Gøtze observed:

As citizens have become less deferential and dependent, and more consumerist and volatile, old styles of representation have come under pressure to change. There is a pervasive contemporary estrangement between representative and those they represent, manifested in almost every western country by falling voter turnout; lower levels of public participation in civic life; public cynicism towards political

institutions and parties; and a collapse in once-strong political loyalties and attachments (Coleman and Gøtze 2001, 4).

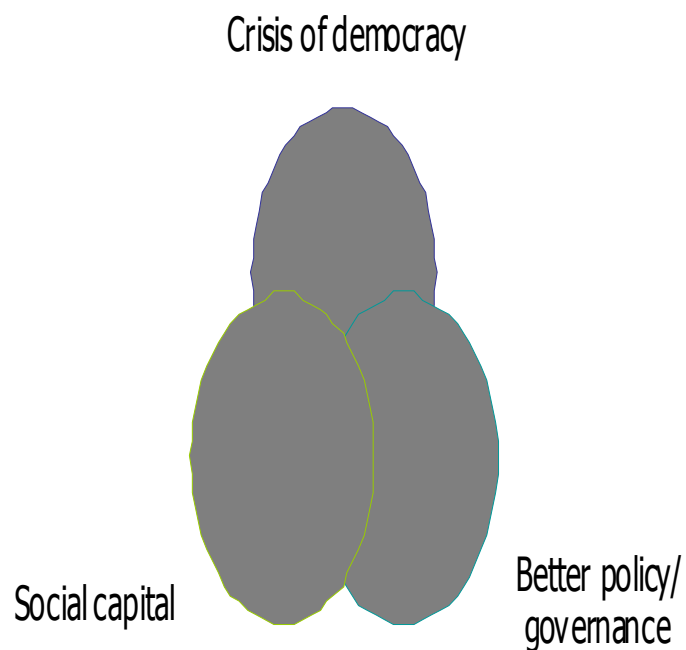
Second, the 'crisis of democracy' thesis emerged alongside, and was very often linked to, the highly influential argument developed by Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam that there had been a decline in *social capital* formation in western democracies. The decline in social capital, which Putnam sees as having adverse consequences for economic performance, social cohesion and the delivery of public services, has its roots in declining participation in civic organisations and networks, which has in turn led to a wider decline in political engagement, and growing cynicism towards the democratic political process and its representative institutions (Putnam 2000). Putnam himself has been skeptical of the capacity of the Internet and ICTs to revive social capital, pointing to unequal access to the Internet and the dangers of 'cyber-balkanisation' (Putnam 2000, 177). By contrast, others have argued that the Internet is promoting a transformation of forms of civic engagement, particularly among younger users, where sustained engagement with organizations via global networks is becoming more important than participation in locality-based community organizations such as sporting teams, local churches or Rotary clubs (Aldridge et. al. 2002; 48-49). Stephen Coleman's (2003) UK study of those most highly engaged in political debate (what he termed the 'political junkies', or PJs) and those who voted contestants off the *Big Brother* TV program (the BBs) revealed that it is not the voting habit that has declined. Rather, there have emerged almost 'two nations' between those most engaged with the political process and reality TV viewers, and it is the latter group that is growing, and needs to be re-engaged with formal institutional politics.

Finally, ICTs have been identified as being important to *strengthening the relationship between governments and citizens*, thereby improving policy-making, public trust in governments, and good governance. The OECD has identified the need to enhance the involvement of citizens in policy-making, as it allows governments to tap into new sources of policy-relevant ideas, information and resources, raises the quality of democratic engagement,

enhances transparency and government accountability, strengthens civic capacity, and thereby helps to build both the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democracies (OECD 2003). While much of the focus of national public policies towards ICTs has thus far revolved around developing broadband network capacity, getting people online, and providing information more easily through Web portals that reduce search time for users and reduce distribution costs for disseminating information, the OECD has been clear that better policy-making requires a move from information provision to public consultation to active participation by citizens in the policy process, which promotes active citizenship and a role for citizens in shaping policy options, the policy dialogue, and policy outcomes.

The impetus for revivifying political participation and deliberation among citizens, and between citizens and governments and public agencies, in order to revitalise the democratic political process therefore clearly exists. Yet any assessment of the utilisation of the Internet and ICTs for political engagement reveals a decidedly mixed score card. The bursting of the 'dot.com' share market bubble arising from the collapse of NASDAQ-listed shares in April 2000 has certainly encouraged circumspection about grandiose claims about the transformative impact of new media. Moreover, we need to be clear that the three areas where ICTs are seen as having transformative potential are, while related, by no means synonymous. Rather, these are best thought about as three overlapping areas, where policies which target one area may impact upon the others, but may not.

Figure 1: Elements of the e-Democracy Debate



The empirical evidence of both e-government initiatives and the applications of new media by existing political organisations also point to the limits of the transformative impact of the Web upon politics and political discourse. Actual experiments in e-government and participatory online decision-making have often proved disappointing. Traditional forms of government policy making

and political organization, based upon centralised, hierarchical, one-to-many communication, and 'push' models of state-citizen communication have struggled to adapt to decentralised, networked, many-to-many forms of interaction associated with the Internet (Bellamy and Taylor 1999; Chadwick and May 2003; Houghton and Burgess 2003). This is at odds with what Coleman and Gøtze have stressed as 'the challenge ... to create a link between e-government and e-democracy – to transcend the one-way model of service delivery and exploit for democratic purposes the feedback paths that are inherent to digital media' (Coleman and Gøtze 2001, 5). In a similar vein, the OECD has also acknowledged that e-government is not simply about electronic service delivery, but about 'using ICT to transform the structures, operations and, most importantly, the culture of government' (OECD 2003, 17).

The conflation of e-government – or the better delivery of government services through ICTs – and e-democracy has proved to be a particular problem. E-government has been driven primarily by the development of online resources which reduce the transaction costs between government agencies and the users of government services by developing attractive, easy-to-use Web portals that enable consumers and businesses to save time and convenience in accessing necessary government services, and to make information available in distributable networked formats (e.g. Adobe PDF files), so as to minimise the search costs associated with access to relevant information from government agencies. As Bellamy and Taylor (1999) had anticipated, such approaches to e-government may have the effect of promoting a form of ‘consumer democracy’, which was beneficial to the agencies concerned and to its users, insofar as they sought to undertake activities such as paying taxes in a less time-consuming way using online media, but did little to enrich the democratic process along the lines that e-democracy advocates had envisaged. Anderson and Bishop (2004) have correlated the Brown University e-government scorecard against the Freedom House findings on levels of political freedom throughout the world, and found that countries which score highly on e-government provision, most notably Singapore, score poorly on other measures of political freedom. Moreover, this lack of correlation may be no accident. Kalathil and Boas (2003) have found that one-party states such as the People’s Republic of China and Singapore maintain legitimacy in the Internet age by offering leading-edge online applications to their citizens, while continuing to monitor and censor the Internet to restrict political dissidence and suppress alternative views.

One example of the tensions between the e-government and e-democracy agendas can be found in a 2002 report of the Australian National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE), titled *Better Services, Better Government* (NOIE 2002). In both its preamble by the then-Minister, Senator Richard Alston, and in the report itself, it is continually stressed that the principal purposes that underpin the use of ICTs in the public sector is a more cost-effective approach to the delivery of government services. Enhancement of citizen engagement with the policy process was seen as, at best, a positive

side-effect of the application of ICTs to achieve greater economic efficiency in government service delivery. In their comparative study into e-government initiatives in seven countries, Dunleavy *et. al.* (2003) noted that Australia had been 'falling back from its pioneer e-government status to becoming a slightly complacent and strategy-less follower of a wave now lead from elsewhere' (Dunleavy *et. al.* 2003, 12). Such a decline for Australia in the 'e-government score card' has been due, in part, to the confused brief of NOIE as simultaneously promoting the development of e-commerce, e-government and e-democracy, and the underlying assumption that advances in one field automatically flowed into other, otherwise unconnected, fields.

On Line Opinion - Building it

Contours

National Forum was first conceived of 6 years ago, in 1998 by Graham Young, at the time a property developer and part-time political apparatchik, with a B.A. Honours in English Literature who had a falling out with his party – the Queensland Liberals – over their relationship with One Nation. He had had extensive policy experience as well as being recognized as an outstanding campaign strategist and analyst.

He was concerned that Australians were increasingly isolating themselves into hostile tribes (of which One Nation was a symptom, not a cause). Late in 1998 during the Federal election he became involved in a campaign against One Nation which used email to manage volunteers and disseminate information.

As a result of his experience and concerns he saw two related political uses of the 'net. It could be used as a campaigning tool to almost infinitely dissect the market and send each micro-segment, or even voter, a specially tailored email at virtually no cost of production or distribution, apart from time. It could also serve, using limited resources compared to the alternatives, to help people to re-engage with each other and with their society in a new and radical way without having to rely on established channels of communication.

And that is what National Forum and its journal *On Line Opinion* are about – community and campaigns.

The first stage

Since *On Line Opinion* was first published in April, 1999 it has grown rapidly to the stage where in March 2004 it had 104,818 site visits and 237,474 page views. Monthly readership is estimated to be in the region of 37,500, with 14,650 reading at least weekly. The email distribution list was 4,452 in March and grows at around 200 a month. Over 40 volunteers help with commissioning and editing articles, and there are around 20 columnists who provide regular material at no cost. These include four Parliamentary Members two of whom – Andrew Bartlett and Mark Latham – are party leaders. The Editorial Advisory Board is chaired by Brian Johns and numbers others like Leonie Kramer amongst its members.

It was realized very early on that replicating a hard copy journal on the Internet not only shortchanges the medium, but that the journal would succumb to other competitors who might use the possibilities of the medium in a fuller way, so *On Line Opinion* (OLO) is only a tentative first step.

Architect's plans and concepts

There are three useful paradigms for explaining the total concept. The first is that of the town square; second is that of a shopping center of ideas; and third is the producers co-operative.

Town Square

A town square is a place where people can meet and socialise. It's also a place where they can collect signatures on petitions, set up stalls to inform or organise mass demonstrations. It is space which is free for any citizen to use, and where the agenda is essentially driven by citizens. In townplanning terms town squares also ideally act as connectors between important buildings housing the agents of civil society such as legislatures, government

departments, courts, libraries, art galleries, political parties, NGOs and places of learning. A town square mediates and it connects.

On Line Opinion exhibits some of these characteristics, and the eventual National Forum site will exhibit many more. The site should be free to use and it should support a layered approach to information and activism, mimicking the variety of degrees of engagement available in a town square from the social to the deeply politically engaged. *OLO* is free. The essays are designed to be readily digestible, and they are accompanied by links which provide leads to information of greater depth.

Shopping Centre of Ideas

The second paradigm is that of the regional shopping center. In the town square metaphor the square is a link between various participants in civil society. In the shopping center paradigm this becomes more explicit. A town square basically fulfils its function through location – because it is where it is it will be get used – it has a high profile and it has proximity to those you might want to influence or impress. Not much more active management is required, than cutting the grass and watering the flowerbeds.

The Internet is different – its geography is always shifting. There is also the vexed question of who will pay for the upkeep of the “town square” – at the moment there are no cyber citizens who can be forced to pay rates or taxes. That’s where the shopping center comes in. What a shopping center developer does is secure a high profile location which is near major populations and transport routes. They put infrastructure on it which makes it easy for customers to access shops; provides an environment which is conducive to shopping; allows individual stores to share in the costs of providing this infrastructure and marketing it; and most importantly provides a context to those shops. As a result the amount of custom generated is higher than can be generated outside the center, so the retailers are happy to pay a higher occupancy cost to be part of a center.

By providing more traffic to parts of an individual organisation's site than they can generate themselves there is an economic advantage to them which they should be prepared to share with the developer – in this case National Forum/*On Line Opinion*. While the National Forum site, being democratic, had to be free, there are a number of organizations whose core business is democracy and giving information away for free. We support the larger part of our operations by charging a number of those organizations "rent" which is actually a membership fee. The Universities who are members of National Forum are like department stores, while the smaller organizations are analogous to niche retailers.

This shopping center structure does provide some editorial challenges when you look at the site in terms of journalism. These are dealt with later.

Buyers Co-operative

The last metaphor is that of the buyers co-operative, or industry organization. A website is not an artifact it is a process. As such the web developer needs to continuously monitor how the site is being used and the technologies and realities with which it intersects. At one level National Forum's role is to provide member organisations with intelligence as to what their clients, or potential clients, are doing and needing. One manifestation of this is the focus group work that is done from the site which provides members (and the public because the work is always published and made freely available) valuable insight into what Australians are thinking about particular topics such as how they are going to vote, the US FTA, university funding, private versus public education, or Mark Latham.

At another level the organisation looks to represent our members in dealing with other organizations who may be developing complementary technological solutions to similar problems. It's important that there be a certain degree of interoperability, for example, between what Parliamentary Members are doing on the National Forum site and what parliaments are doing with, for example, Hansards, or the various electoral commissions with election results.

Editorial considerations

Editorial considerations are very important because in many ways we are undertaking a work of journalism – we take the idea of the media as a “fourth estate”, part of the democratic process, seriously.

Guided democracy

The agenda is set by an editorial team – primarily Hugh Brown and Graham Young; by our member organizations; and by our contributors. While the conception is democratic, it needs leadership which we try to provide through a concept of by conceiving the role as being similar to chairing a meeting. We practice “gate-keeping”, just as the mainstream media do, but we conceive of ours as “gate-keeping lite”. Our job is to breathe life into the discussion, to poke from behind it if it needs to be poked, and sometimes to lead from in front. Leading is best done by proxy – by finding contributors who can put that particular point of view which opens up the debate.

Our contributors split into two broad categories, and our approach is tailored differently for each. If someone represents a major organization that brings more capital to our site through the article than we give to them by publishing it, then we normally just check grammar. If they make a fool of themselves they will not make a fool of us. If someone is just a writer without any sort of established and valuable reputation, then we are much more stringent – in this case they have the potential to debase our brand because we give them much more credibility than they give to us.

This is a different approach to that used by, for example, the Indymedia sites, which seem to eschew most conventional editorial controls, but that approach brings problems. Democracy can be too promiscuous. You need to have bounds. The result of not having good editorial bounds (and allowing writers to contribute anonymously, also a problem for Crikey!) is that the combined Indymedia sites at www.indymedia.org have a much smaller audience than say The Drudge Report <http://www.drudgereport.com/>, or even the Sydney Morning Herald online. Nevertheless there is a tension between democracy and editing. Our solution is not to use a collective approach, but to have the editing contract contestable – open to election after a set term (in our case 5 years).

Our approach has seen us build a quality group of contributors who frequently submit on “spec” and so shape the editorial direction of the journal. By applying standards we actually make it more valuable for them to contribute to us, than it might be to contribute to other similar sites.

Checks and balances

There is another reason for having some elements of a top-down management structure – we are trying to create a new paradigm. Our paradigm embraces diversity and tries to provide what we call “peripheral vision on the ’net”. Professor Cass Sunstein, amongst others, has looked at the dynamics of group discussion and found that they tend to polarize, with groups of like-minded people intensifying their beliefs as a result of discussing them. His concern, (Sunstein 2002), is that the ’net will tend to degenerate into a collection of ghettos where like minds talk to like minds, and where bad ideas create bad behaviours.

We are consciously setting up a model with a structure (organizational and coded into the software) designed to minimize that risk. The challenge is to convince our users and members to enter into this part of the project in such a way that it continues and develops. Because it is a new paradigm, it requires the establishment of a community that accepts that paradigm, which

requires some elements of hierarchical leadership in order to establish firm directions and boundaries.

One of the fantasies of new technologies is the idea that if you build it they will come and that together we will revolutionise the world. In fact, technologies depend on human agency for their meanings and uses. On one side successful development of technology platforms in the area of governance has to work in ways that enhance and leverage from what people already do. On the other side, spending millions of dollars building sites that can do things, because we can build them, and because we think they are a good idea, does not necessarily lead to them being used.

Bias and balance

What is the difference between what we are doing and advertorial? At one level, not much, but then you would be surprised how much standard journalistic output is really not much more than advertorial. There is a myth that journalism can be balanced.

Our solution is to accept that there are biases in everything and to provide a system of competing ideas rather than striving for balanced reporting. We hope to maintain balance between, rather than within pieces. To do this we need to be transparent about who supplies information (this is relatively easy as almost all pieces on *OLO* are self-authored) and to ensure that as far as possible opposing points of view are represented on the site. Over time we expect the diversity of our membership to create a tension which produces this naturally. At the moment our members are very diverse. Two universities – Sydney and QUT – give us significant support, while a number of university departments (including the Department of Politics and Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at Melbourne University) give us more modest support. We also have NGO members as diverse as Oxfam, Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy, the Catholic Church and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union. Our concept is Socratic. We believe that confronted with conflicting information our users can make up their own minds

as to what is the truth, and that we have no business telling them what to believe.

It might be asked why our members would support a site where their opponents also get to put their point of view. At first glance this seems absurdly altruistic, but it can be justified in terms of self-interest. While each of our members has an interest in their point of view triumphing, they also have an interest in accessing as many people as possible and ensuring that their competitors do not get a break over them. In real estate what you find is that competitors do better when positioned side by side than when located in separate positions. As a result, many regional centers will have two department stores and two supermarkets, because the competing owners can better service their own interests if they cooperate at least to the extent of being in the same space. And once one is in a successful center, the other will need to be, or they would not be doing the right thing by their shareholders.

The ultimate site is conceived of as a collection of various “retailing” precincts (such as a site for parliamentarians called an iParliament) and attraction strategies (like *OLO*). Of course, as this is the Internet, each of these precincts and attractors can also be used as a way of accessing the whole site. *OLO* is like a shopping catalogue at one end of its spectrum, while simultaneously being the whole shopping center at the other.

We are currently exploring avenues for harnessing feedback from current and potential members which will allow us to incorporate features into the site which they believe will meet their needs, and then to monitor just how these features are used and whether they do in fact meet expectations in terms of performance and use.

Brokerage

Which leads me to another aspect of the site that I want to note. While I have been talking about the site as being an adjunct to other organisations' sites, it is actually more than that. There are things that can be done on the site that can't be done on individual members' sites. For example, when we poll readers we gather all sorts of political information about them that I am sure they would not be prepared to give directly to a member of parliament. By being the broker, we can provide that information to the politicians, at the same time involving the participants in ways that the parliamentarian could not. At the moment much of the e-Democracy experimentation in Australia is being done on government owned sites. This actually limits what is possible in some areas, and there is a need for governments to involve wider groups of stakeholders in third party sites. Not only does it make certain activities possible, but it also removes some of the risk of innovation from government, and it is that risk which many government officers seem to find the most concerning.

This brokerage role is actually very important in building a community around the site that will make it self-sustaining in the medium term. We have polled thousands of Australians in depth about their attitudes to political issues via qualitative surveys combined with online focus groups in specially designated chat rooms. Some of these participate only once, but around a thousand are on a database and contribute regularly. We have built up trust with them to the stage where they are prepared to give us great insights into what they think on issues. The quid pro quo is that we feed the information back to them, so that they gain greater understanding themselves, and also relay it on to the decision makers, who they ultimately want to influence.

As a result we have produced reports from this research which have been able to predict elector behaviour in every election campaign where we have applied it long before any mainstream journalists have understood what was happening.

For example, in the 2001 Federal election (our first study) we detected two basic reactions to the terrorism and refugee issues. Middle Australia thought that the government had limited scope to affect either, but saw the ALP as being untrustworthy on these issues. This lack of trust coloured their attitude to overall ALP policy. Blue-collar conservatives, in particular those who had moved to One Nation, by contrast wholeheartedly endorsed the government's refugee strategy. The Government was directing most of its campaign towards this second group and they were responding strongly.

Feedback

We are currently exploring avenues for harnessing feedback from current and potential members, including seeking research funds, which will allow us to incorporate features into the site which users believe will meet their needs. We then plan to monitor just how these features are used and whether they do in fact meet expectations in terms of performance and use.

This process will involve intelligence gathered from website statistics as well as normal qualitative and quantitative research techniques, including some of those we have pioneered on the Internet.

Conclusion

The overall approach that we have taken is to build a site that initially met user needs at one level and to organically grow that site, enlisting supporters and volunteers as we go. This is an approach which minimizes risk at the same time that it increases the opportunities to learn, but it also pays attention to the aspect that many pioneering efforts in this field have ignored – the need for users to actually be satisfied by the site. What we are doing isn't a "field of dreams" but more like a "barn raising". We haven't built a site and just expected a community to form, we have formed a community which can then build the site.

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