The Citizens Voice in a Wired World:

Experiments in e-democracy

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1. Introduction

A new mood of anxiety permeates the domain of western liberal democratic politics. At its heart the democratic state is an uneasy alliance between the autonomous rights and obligations of the citizens and the corresponding duties and expectations of their political representatives and custodians. In recent years a serious concern has arisen that the politicians and political institutions of our modern democracies no longer command legitimacy in the minds of many citizens. Throughout Europe and North America electoral turnouts have been decreasing (The 2000 USA Presidential Election and the 2001 UK General Election produced the lowest turnouts in living memory), party membership has fallen dramatically and disenchantment with politicians, particularly among the young is a common concern. This dislocation of the political process from the everyday interests of many citizens is further widened in many countries by the decline in ideological political discourse and a related breakdown of class-based political organisation.

For the cynic this crisis of liberal democracy is merely the manifestation of the self-serving motives of political life. For the more cautiously critical however it bears witness to the migration of much power from the nation state to global corporate institutions and events such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the terrorist attacks on the USA in 2001. Significantly such trends are borne by the tide of permanent innovation and driven in part by the emerging convergence of digital technologies. The potential transforming capabilities of new media such as the Internet and the global networked economies they engender are often regarded as both contributing to the democratic malaise and offering the prospect of democratic renewal.

The presentation today focuses upon the potential of ICTs to enable us to formulate new modes of *governance* which act to reconfigure social relations between the *state* and *civil society*. Its perspective however is from an analysis of how citizens themselves may be shaping the new media to create pressure for change in our democratic institutions and practices. It is not therefore concerned with top down attempts to re-engineer public administrations through electronic service delivery. Rather it is concerned with grassroots initiatives which foster changes in our civil democratic activity and which we may describe as experiments in e-democracy. My contention is that only the reforming conjuncture of these two spheres – civil society and political institutions – is likely to re-invigorate democratic governance.

Before we can investigate the evidence for community driven democratic action two further preliminary points must be made. First, the arguments put forward here <u>do not</u> comply with the somewhat simplistic, if not irrelevant idea, that the new media will see representative democracy being replaced by Athenian direct democracy; with every citizen around the world enjoying constant debate and direct influence upon political decision-making. Not only does such an idea depict a rather intensely depressing vision of human creativity but more importantly remains highly impractical even if people are – and I don't believe them to be so – one-dimensional in their outlook! Instead, the more interesting issue is whether access to ICTs enable more citizens to influence the quality of political deliberation, improve accountability of representatives, and provide a political voice on those occasions when citizens wish to participate and be heard on issues of their choosing. It is these dimensions which we will consider today.

Second, I must make the usual disclaimer to *technological determinism* which suggests that change and our actions are in someway defined by the new technologies. Instead, the perspective taken in this presentation is that the new ICTs are shaped by complex social, cultural, and economic factors. What is of interest therefore is how communities and civil society provide a fulcrum for innovative uses and development of the new media for enhancing democratic activity. We are often more interested in human imagination and creativity than the technical hardware. This approach also helps us to avoid the determinist trajectories of utopian visionaries or the dystopian proclamations of techno-luddites. Instead, our expectations are not that the new media will herald the arrival of an entirely new form of democratic politics but rather that it offers the prospect for many traditional aspects of the democratic model – transparency, accountability, participation, protest, freedom of information, privacy, human rights, social inclusion – to be considered in changed social and economic conditions.
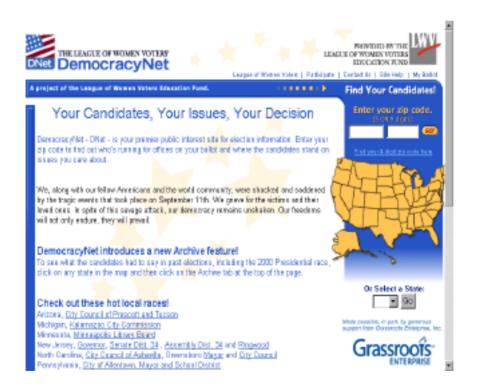
2. Categorising e-democracy

E-democracy initiatives may manifest themselves in a variety of forms. For convenience today these may be grouped into *Campaigning, Citizen Forums*, and *New Virtual Political Movements*.

2.1. Campaigning

The umbilical link between civil society and the political sphere is often most clearly visible during election campaigns when for the most part voluntarily organised political parties provide a vehicle for aggregating support for their candidates. At a time when electorates in mature democracies are becoming increasingly disenchanted

with sound-byte politics, spin doctors and orchestrated mass media campaigns, the new ICTs offer the potential for citizens to subvert these control strategies. Whilst political parties and candidates are becoming rapidly aware of the use of the **Internet** for canvassing voters, fundraising and motivating supporters (Coleman 2000) such web-based communication technologies have also been used to challenge the *sound-byte* media campaigns and make candidates more directly responsive to the voice of the electorate. In the USA, for example, websites such *DemocracyNet* (www.dnet.org) and *Webwhiteblue* (www. Webwhiteblue.com) have attempted to provide neutral sites where citizens can obtain information about the candidates and interrogate them on issues which may influence their voting preference. Furthermore, the technology can be used to verify statements made by political candidates and provide almost instantaneous refutations if appropriate.

www.dtnet.org.

www.webwhiteblue.org

Tactical voting has also been a feature of web-based campaigning most notably with the impact of Ralph Nader's campaign in the US Presidential election (see www.NaderTrader.com) and www.tacticalvoter.net in the UK General Election.

2.2. Citizen Forums

As a means to engender the more informed public deliberation so essential to strong democratic politics **electronic forums** have been utilized. Again these *citizen forums* take many different forms. These have included locality based citizen forums such as *Minnesota E-Democracy* in the USA, and *UK Citizens Online Democracy*. The former states on its website that it intends to be "a non-partisan citizen-based organisation whose mission is to improve participation in democracy in Minnesota through the use of information networks." Established largely through the driving force of Steven Clift in 1994 the site has become a leading example of citizen created

public spaces for enhancing democratic activity. Perhaps the litmus test for such online spaces is the extent to which the established media and political representatives feel the need to access such sites to gauge public opinion.
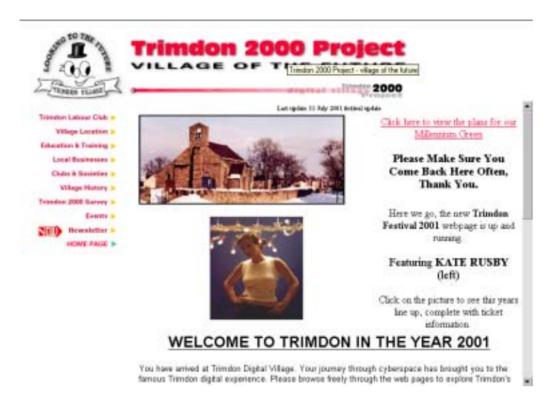

www.e-democracy.org

Not all who witness the emergence of an information age can feel confident about the capacity of the new information and communications technologies (ICTs) to favour democracy over injustice. The technologies of politics are politically shaped (Sclove, 1995) and require a vigilant analysis of their development. They can just as easily act to reinforce and exacerbate existing social and economic divisions as they might act to foster forces for enhanced democratic activity (Loader, 1998). The pursuit of democracy therefore requires that those on the margins of technological and political development are provided with a voice with which to articulate their own interests and the opportunities to structure their futures.

The inclusion of such constituents has been the intention of various community informatics initiatives through the construction of civil electronic networks. One such project in the UK is called Trimdon Digital Village (TDV). Its primary objective has been a critical consideration of the potential for ICTs to empower communities and enable them to secure their own development in conditions of rapid political, social and economic change. At its heart is a concern with the notion of 'civil democracy': a

perspective which stresses that democratic activity is as much dependent upon the social networks of support, exchange and interaction which ground the day-to-day experiences of citizens and facilitate participation, as it is upon the rule of law, individual rights and representative institutions.

In the first eighteen months of its existence the TDV project, comprising a partnership of Trimdon2000, BT and the Community Informatics Research and Applications Unit (CIRA) based at the University of Teesside, UK, had established a small community network of three sites linked to the Internet. Community members had engaged in local learning courses on ICTs and developed their own community Website as a consequence of a two day workshop. Their awareness and confidence was sufficient by the end of this first period to enable them to provide significant critical feedback to ensure the modification of an AOL designed Website for UK Citizens Online Democracy's (UKCOD) Freedom of Information project. Such achievements, however, should not mask the problems encountered in attempting to expand the participation of community residents, the challenges of community project management, and the difficulty of changing the cultures of information providers.

www.trimdon.org.uk

Similarly attempts have been made to develop a civil electronic public space through

the creation of a network of communities in the Tees Valley sub-region of North

Eastern England

www.tvco.org.uk

2.3. New Virtual Political Movements

The final dimension of citizen driven e-democracy initiatives which are included in this presentation relate to the development of new social movements and their use of the new media. As a means of facilitating the creation of cross-national, 'dis-organised' networks for collective action on the basis of negotiated common concerns, the Internet could have been purpose built for new social movements (NSMs). A growing body of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century attests to the significant impact NSMs have had upon the restructuring of the political landscape. More recently attention has turned to the synergy between the transforming qualities of emerging information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the social movement driven new cultural politics (Castells, 1997; Webster, 2001). What has stimulated this interest is the perceived ascendancy of this cyber-cultural politics against a backdrop of the declining salience of traditional political organisation and discourse.

Prominent aspects of this process include the development of globalisation and the concomitant threat to the importance of the nation state; transnational communication networks arising from the new media; the decline of 'ideological' politics, and the related decoupling of class interest politics; and, the emergence of political organisations and activity loosely formed around universal values and moral principles such as environmentalism, animal rights, and a range of human rights.

The significant role of NSMs is to offer the prospect of a new cultural politics. One that rejects traditional highly organised, institutionalised class-based politics but rather foregrounds lifestyle politics and politics of affinity which reach beyond nation-state borders. A symbolic politics which embraces new repertoires of political activity designed to circumvent established interests and social elites and appeal directly to the public. Through their symbiotic relationship with the world's mass media NSMs are able to portray their message through a fusion of symbols, images, icons and drama which proclaim their anxieties, values and concerns more effectively than enlightenment ideals of rational deliberation.

The convergence of old and new media, offering as it does the opportunity for many-to-many communication across a global network which transcend parameters of both time and space, is likely to have still further significant implications for these social movement driven cultural politics. In particular is its potential to collapse the social and political spheres by creating new forms of discourse outside the ambit of traditional politics and which deal with such matters as intimate relationships, about different sexualities, about frailty, about personal risk, and which prioritise lay experience over professional expertise.
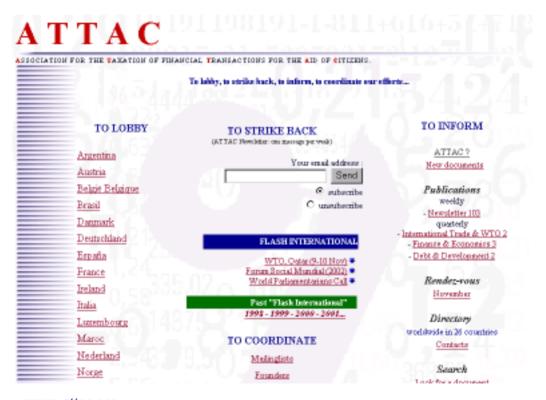

www.powertothepeople.org

"Power to the People is a project of Global Exchange. We are building a coalition of concerned individuals, environmentalists, consumer groups, unions, community groups, and small businesses who are promoting and working for clean, affordable, public power."
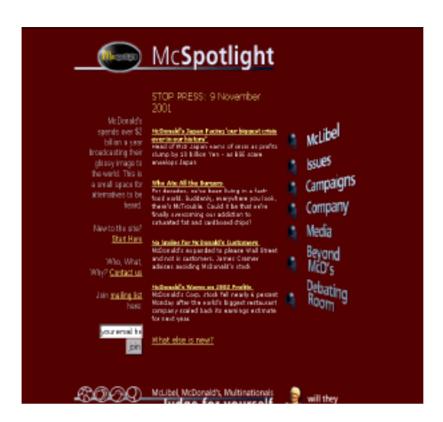
www.aseed.net

www.attac.org

A group linking citizens, associations, trade unions and newspapers founded ATTAC

in France in 1998 with the intention of supporting the Tobin tax.

www.mcspotlight.org

www.rtmark.com

trmark is a brokerage which enables citizens to use their website to list projects which can be widely discussed and on occasions financially supported by interested citizens.

Concluding Comments

In themselves ICTs will not regenerate our ailing democracies. However, they represent increasingly powerful tools which can make a significant contribution the re-shaping and legitimacy of democratic politics. I have tried to suggest in this presentation that the mechanistic re-engineering approach to e-Government is not likely to achieve its objectives of re-establishing the relationship between state and citizen. It is also necessary to facilitate the development of strong civil democracy. In this endeavour the innovate use of ICTs to enable citizens to campaign, deliberate, interrogate and protest on the political issues which affect their lives may significantly change the voice of the citizen vis-à-vis our democratic institutions and practices.