

BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

Andrew Rasiej

“ Our corrupt system of distant, unaccountable representative democracy is going to get an overhaul, whether the representatives like it or not. ”

ever since the creation of our imperfect union, it has suffered under conditions that our forefathers had hoped would never occur in the democratic system they devised. Instead of a government that would serve the people and empower them, more often than not our government has become a bureaucratic maze, with institutional deafness, and laziness coupled with corruption and deference to special interests to the point where people feel so disempowered that only half of eligible citizens even bother to vote. Where our country's founders idealistically thought all citizens would welcome and take advantage of the right to vote, they would be shocked to learn most voters view participation in civic life as abstract and irrelevant to their lives, livelihoods, or future prospects. Well, because the Internet empowers communication between people and information in powerful new ways the ideal of full participation may still be realized.

Forgive this oversimplification, but as they saw it, our forefathers believed that “the people” were too busy plowing the fields, raising families, and settling the country in the “pursuit of happiness” to be burdened with the worries of running the state and protecting it from its enemies.

So in keeping with this view, they designed a “representative” government “for and by the people,” whereby representatives would be elected to do all the necessary worrying and business of governing. They believed that by giving “the people” the right to vote and elect these representative leaders they were creating a democratic society. A society such as this would by definition hold elected officials accountable for their performance and throw them out of office if they failed to perform the people’s will.

At the time, the assumption regarding the preoccupations of citizens wasn’t so far off the mark. Not only was it true that most citizens were busy plowing fields in an effort to survive, these same citizens had very little time to educate themselves regarding the processes of governing or the issues facing society and the country, such as land distribution, international trade, war, displaced and violent Indians, and disputes among the states. Even though “citizens” were given a right to vote, they had little idea of how to exercise this right in an organized way. Let’s face it: “the people” had little experience and knowledge so they participated in this new democracy on the fly.

As time went on, elected representatives learned how to use the system they were elected to run to largely keep themselves in power. They used their positions to enrich themselves and their friends, fight off challengers (think gerrymandering of districts), and pass laws that allowed them to preserve and consolidate their control over this bastardized form of democracy. Pretty soon, people with real problems learned that they couldn’t get their problems solved by voting in new people to replace the old, failed ones. So they began to form organized

groups such as political parties, labor unions, trade associations, and not-for-profits to force their representatives to listen to them, in large part because of the size of their memberships. These groups raised money for their elected officials, denounced their leaders' enemies, and attacked anyone who had opposing views until they got their way.

Ultimately, over time, these various groups' efforts created even more imbalance within the system. Those with the time and money won out over the masses, and their success has created many of the afflictions facing our democracy today. To wit: Organized minorities are more powerful than disorganized majorities. As an example, one need look no further than Florida where Cubans have been making sure with great success that the embargo on their former homeland remains intact until their economic interests (mostly property they own in Miami) are not lost when the embargo is lifted and a great sucking sound is heard across the Caribbean as capitalism floods their former island, leaving Miami to play second fiddle to a rejuvenated Havana. As further proof, did you know that the Dade county election commission that suspended the vote counting during the Bush vs. Gore 2000 election was dominated by Cubans intent on restoring an anti-Castro Republican administration?

Now the Internet is marching its way through society, creating a new economy of abundance and an exponential explosion in the amount of information available to the human race. The ability to aggregate and share knowledge has become democratized and commonplace, and the "wisdom of crowds" isn't a fanciful notion but an opportunity for the "will of the people" to be put into effect either by surviving institutions and leaders or by the people acting in their place.

This doesn't mean that we are all going to become one assembled mass in some new virtual Coliseum, thumbing up or down ideas and feeding losers to the lions. Rather, it means that we'll have new and expansive ways to share the best information about anything that's

important and involve citizen experts in deliberations and decision-making. An early example is Politicopia.com where citizens can participate in an open wiki that crafts legislation for the State of Utah.

So what happens to our forefathers' idea of representative democracy in this brave new world? Do we really need representatives if we have morphed from panoply of organized minorities to one big organized majority? One need look no farther than Wikipedia.com or Congresspedia.com to see examples of how collected organized knowledge can produce a resource that improves people's lives that also continues to evolve as an ongoing human asset. Every day there are new self-organizing groups producing and sharing their knowledge, skills, and time, building better and better information systems which will solve problems and improve the world.

The author Clay Shirky uses the phrase "cognitive surplus" to mean the free brain time the industrialized world has generated for people. For instance, he estimates that Wikipedia has leveraged about 100 million total human hours. Furthering his point, he estimates that Americans spend 200 billion total hours a year passively watching TV and never engaging in a productive activity; in other words our untapped surplus brainpower is sitting on the couch watching American Idol. All that TV watching equals the time it would take to create 2000 Wikipedias. Imagine if just one percent of that cognitive time was harnessed, humans could have an additional 20 resources equal to the value of Wikipedia. Well, a small but discernible percentage of the population is deciding to shut off the television and take advantage of the Internet Age to embrace the read/write Web and participate.

Our corrupt system of distant, unaccountable representative democracy is going to get an overhaul, whether the representatives like it or not. Indeed, organizations like the Sunlight Foundation are publishing government information and data in easily searchable and open databases, creating more transparency and illuminating the inner workings

of government in ways never imagined possible. Other sites like *outside.in* offer citizens the ability to contribute local neighborhood information often with real-time news, opinions, and conversations about everything happening around them faster than any government agency, city council, or community board could ever hope. And this is just the beginning. Wait till the next generation of citizens—those for whom sharing information collectively is a natural pursuit—start worrying about why government doesn't work for them. They will not wait for government to act like our parents did and our forefathers hoped; they'll just go do whatever needs to get done, themselves.

Abraham Lincoln was more prescient than he realized when he wrote in the Gettysburg Address, “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

About the Author

Andrew Rasiej is the Founder of Personal Democracy Forum , an annual conference and community website about the intersection of politics and technology. He is also the co-founder of *techPresident*, an award-winning group blog that covers how the 2008 presidential candidates are using the web, and how content generated by voters is affecting the campaign. Rasiej is the founder of MOUSE (Making Opportunities for Upgrading Schools and Education), an educational non-profit organization started in 1997 focused on providing technology support to public schools. Rasiej also maintains the position of senior technology adviser for the Sunlight Foundation, a Washington D.C. based organization that focuses on using technology to expose corruption in Congress and facilitates citizen engagement and oversight.