

A MILLENNIAL UPGRADE FOR AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

David B. Smith

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A few years ago I was asked to define the very large generation of teens and twenty-somethings who had recently come of age, my generation, known as the Millennials. I began with the notion that our generation refuses to be defined, partially due to our diversity and partially due to our arrogance and ignorance. At the same time, I was asked to provide some insights into the shared values and principles of the Internet. I began to see some similarities between the Internet and my generation (perhaps this is why we are often referred to as the Dot.com, Net and iGeneration).

Over the past couple of centuries, it seems as though the people have abdicated power to our local, state, and federal decision making bodies. Individuals have grown more and more powerless by allowing ourselves to get pushed to the outside of the political process. We have

relied upon our elected officials to identify the problems they want to fix. They have sold us on these issues, informed us about how they plan to solve them, and then gone about doing all of this with very limited input from us, the citizenry.

The greatest influence of 21st century technologies on the democratic process has taken place in the hearts and minds of individuals, not on computer screens or over the Web. We often talk about how new gadgets or emerging technology will change the way our government interacts with our electorate, but trying to apply these innovations directly to our current, arcane institutions misses the boat. Our Founding Fathers created a system that rebuffs change, particularly radical and significant shifts. We must look for venues where new ways of doing things can bear greater fruit—through individual and then institutional renewal. The phenomenon of the Internet and the various technologies related to it have changed the underlying values of individuals and society as a whole.

The Center for Individual and Institutional Renewal focuses on changing the way people think so as to change the way we act collectively and influence institutions. This methodology is based on the premise that our institutions reject change, rarely lead, and mostly follow the dominant culture. If this is an accurate assumption, then our first target for change should be the hearts and minds of citizens. We must then change how they act, which will ultimately lead to an institutional response.

Changing the Way We Think

The values of a world bogged down by television broadcasting, mass media distribution, and mass production leave a lot to be desired by Millennials. Traditional newspapers have nearly been run out of business, television shows are trying, and failing, to keep pace by inserting interactive themes and opportunities for viewer engagement, and our

elected officials have found themselves in the basement in terms of approval ratings and voter participation.

Contrary to broadcast media, the dominant values of the Internet include (but are certainly not limited to): transparency, openness, worthiness of varying views, collaboration, and horizontal communications. Again, I do not think it is a coincidence that these values resonate with Millennials as both personal values and ones we hope to see in our leaders. We value individual opinion and listen to our peers at a much higher rate than older generations. We feel a greater sense of self worth and empowerment as our thoughts, talents, and ideas are published alongside those of older generations.

The sheer size and networked structure of the Internet and its many-to-many communications platform changes the dominant culture of top-down, militaristic, hierarchical chains of command. Innate to this structure are concepts such as the wisdom of the crowd, permanent innovative processes, and respect for the notion that each individual holds a part of the larger truth. The Internet reinforces the Millennials' view that inclusion of all voices helps us find solutions to collective problems.

Changing the Way We Act

We crave instant gratification in all areas of our lives; celebrity culture and materialism run rampant in our streets. Contrary to the opinion of others, I understand that these personal choices reflect the value of our times for young people and the opportunity costs of participating in a political system that is broken. As voter participation has sunk, we are seeing increasing rates of social entrepreneurship. We are not apathetic; we are simply making a decision as to where our time is more valuable and needed.

The Millennial Generation participates in community service at a higher rate than any past generation, and this is mostly due to the instant gratification and tangible results that come from these actions. Young

leaders are stepping forward and starting non-profit organizations and creating socially conscious business ventures. Our time is best spent, we believe, working directly on solving our community's problems.

We have a nearly complete loss in faith in our political institutions. There is a disconnect between our own needs and those of our elected officials.

Changing Our Institutions

We need to upgrade our system of government to Democracy 2.0, a term coined by Mobilize.org and its extended network. Democracy 2.0 empowers citizens to identify problems facing our nation, propose solutions, and actively implement these solutions in our communities. These citizen-led programs provide pilot projects for local governments that will then be able to evaluate, and ultimately to institutionalize, the best solutions for their communities.

This deliberative democracy format engages citizens in civic problem solving and social entrepreneurship. This process leads to a much more informed and engaged citizenry where the citizen is part resource, expert, shareholder, and a member of a community think tank.

One example of this process is the recent launch of TRAIN (TRANSPORTATION Assistance for INTERNERS). This effort began when a group of college students from around the country began discussing their difficulties affording a summer internship. Some had interned previously and had to go into debt to pay for simple things like transportation to and from their jobs, while others were unable to take an internship due to the costs associated with them. Even with programs that provide college credit for which you can receive student loans, there are additional costs that make internships impractical and unaffordable for many students. Together, they decided to move their conversation from complaining to action and formed TRAIN.

The students began with a service learning approach and researched

the best practices and lessons learned from cities around the country and the world. Next, they took direct action and hosted TRAIN happy hours. Using online social networks, they were quickly and easily able to reach out to hundreds of supporters. The happy hours served as a public education opportunities as well as fundraisers. The funds raised during these events provide travel stipends to a limited number of students. TRAIN also connects students with non-profits and government agencies to find ways to support interns, and advocates with the public transportation providers to reduce the cost to these individuals.

Using dialogue and deliberation techniques in combination with new technology, we can explore the shared values, principles, and needs of communities. Using interactive keypad voting and 21st-century town hall meetings, we can achieve joint decision-making and policy recommendations. Using wiki technology, online dialogues, and web forums, we can further refine these ideas, include more voices in the process, and create agreed-upon language to present to our decision-making bodies. We can also use e-mail advocacy, online petitions, and text messaging as a means of further organizing a greater part of the population to learn about and support this community-created solution.

Still, most citizen-led approaches culminate in elected officials still needing to be convinced of the merit of the proposed solution. The actual power of community voices is still minimal and requires old-school community organizing techniques to support the truth that the wisdom of the crowd has greater merit than professional lobbyists and single-issue constituency groups. This is the major upgrade that has to happen to move us from Democracy 1.0 remnants to a Democracy 2.0 world.

About the Author

David B. Smith is the Founder of Mobilize.org, and is now the Executive Director of The National Conference on Citizenship.