

FOREWORD

Esther Dyson

In 1816, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Those words have never been more salient or important than they are today. We have pressing public policy problems, adults who should be leaders yet instead lead willfully sheltered lives of comfort and ignorance, a citizenry increasingly active in elections yet alienated from governance, an amazing array of new digital tools and platforms that have the potential to inform and empower us and let us self-organize in astonishing and effective ways. The stage is ready and the sunlight of the Internet is shining on us: It can provide light and energy for a fertile, thousand-flowers-blooming garden, or it can ignite the whole thing into flames and burn it out.

This anthology of essays is intended to shine light, to spark conversations among citizens, and between voters and elected officials, about how we can engage more people in public problem solving and community building. Just as the Net created new business models, so can it foster new governance models.

The essayists, an array of creative, innovative thinkers, were invited to contribute short essays on the following topic:

When the Framers met in Philadelphia in 1787, they bravely conjured a new form of self-government. But they couldn't have imagined a mass society with instantaneous, many-to-many communications or many of the other innovations of modernity. So, replacing that quill pen with a mouse, imagine that you have to power to redesign American democracy for the Internet Age. What would you do?

Each of the essays has a unique central idea. There are common themes of citizen participation and empowerment, but within those broad brushstrokes are interesting areas of convergence and divergence. David Weinberger discusses the critical importance of echo chambers to the conversation among citizens that powers our democracy. danah boyd points out the need to break through these silos to broaden the conversation about community life, but also cautions about the potential of today's social networking sites to produce big changes in political behavior. Glenn Harlan Reynolds discusses the fallacy of trying to protect people's privacy in the Internet Age, arguing that we should instead focus on fostering greater transparency around (and through) government institutions. Martin Kearns argues the opposite, that more protections of individual privacy and data are needed to provide people with a sense of personal security in order to engage civically either online or offline.

Some essayists focused on lessons from the past (Julie Barko Germany, Harry Boyte), others zeroed in on improving the present (Steven Clift, Newt Gingrich), and a few gave us a view from the future (Ellen Miller, Zack Exley). Several essayists proposed a radical restructuring of our entire system of government (Aaron Swartz, Nicco Mele and Jan Frel, and Douglas Rushkoff) and others dwelt on the need for individuals to act outside government to propel change (Scott Heiferman, Susan Crawford). And, of course, the radical libertarians call for the radical restraint of government (Avery Knapp and Tennyson McCalla)!

Our society is relentlessly focused on short-term news and results: On Wall Street you have intraday stock movements and an obsession with quarterly earnings and weekly sales figures; in government, politicians pander to the polls using sound bites rather than engaging in reasoned debates (e.g., the gas-tax tomfoolery of the recent presidential campaign). And in private life, you have daily weigh-ins and snack bars full of foodiness in place of plain old healthy living.

Rebooting America is a look at the long term—the past that could have been and the future that still could be. It's ironic that it's a book, but consider it a mere seed containing DNA seeking complementary strands of life in an online conversation with other Americans about how to “reboot” our country.

Please take a moment to explore the ideas and approaches in this anthology. Share them with others and argue—constructively and deeply—about them. Make them into something more than just a book by extending them and giving them life.

—Esther Dyson
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About the Author

Esther Dyson does business as EDventure Holdings. She spends most of her time fostering new companies, new technologies and new markets. In the Nineties she wrote a book about the impact of the Internet on individuals' lives (“Release 2.0”) and a seminal article for WIRED Magazine about the impact of the Net on intellectual property. This decade, she is focused not just on the Internet, but also on the privatization of space exploration and the use of information technology in health care, including the mapping of individuals' genomes. She sits on a variety of boards, most notably (in this context) that of the Sunlight Foundation.