

# THE “KILLER APP” OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Mark Murphy

“Somewhere, sometime soon, the “killer app” will emerge—the American Idol of citizenship, as it were.”

People all over the world are explicitly expressing their opinions in public ways, particularly online. Some of those opinions are prose, like blog entries and e-mails. Public opinion polls conducted online at websites like CNN.com, traditional polls conducted by telephone, and even text voting for American Idol gauge the feelings of a random slice of the public. There are more formal feedback mechanisms like eBay feedback or Amazon.com’s ratings-with-comments. There are even “meta” sites providing opinions about opinions, such as Amazon.com’s rating the relevancy of comments and the discussions those comments spawn.

Online, you can rate products; lawyers, doctors, and other service professionals; movies, songs, and other forms of entertainment, the list goes on and on. Why can’t these mechanisms be applied to public officials and the political process?

The answer is that this change is inevitable: Citizens of democracies will use online tools to voice their opinions of what is going on in their neighborhood, their nation, and the world.

In fact, the U.S. presidential campaign of 2006-2008 has demonstrated a number of new tools for rank-and-file citizens to engage with the campaigns, such as:

- Joining Facebook groups, whether they be for a candidate (e.g., One Million Strong for Barack) or against (e.g., One Million Strong Against Hillary)
- Recording questions and uploading them to YouTube for use in televised debates
- Using the website Eventful to ask a candidate to make a local campaign stop as John Edwards did when he visited Columbus, Kentucky based on the site's "Demand and Be Heard" promotion
- Twittering your thoughts on debates and election results in real time
- Spreading a candidate's message via a variety of online media, such as Ron Paul's advocates raising awareness of their candidate through innumerable online outlets

Of course, most of these are strictly aimed at the presidential race. However, the same concepts could be applied to other political campaigns, or even ongoing policy discussions. Somebody, somewhere is going to create the "killer app" that will allow citizens to become more engaged with their governments. That "killer app" could easily become as widespread as MySpace, Facebook, and the other social networks—not in the least because it could be embedded within those social networks.

So, what should this "killer app" look like?

Will it reflect citizens' rights and responsibilities in a democracy? Will it offer citizens a rich set of ways to express their opinions, or

will it be restricted like traditional Election Day voting systems? Will it offer the openness and transparency necessary for everybody to feel comfortable that the results aren't being rigged? Will it just be an idea that, as much as anything else, is designed to make the application's founders (and their investors) rich, or increase the power of some existing entrenched authority?

I do not claim to have definitive answers to these questions—after all, I'm just one person. My aim is to raise the questions and offer up a candidate set of answers, to spark a debate, rather than “let the chips fall as they may.”

If there is an overarching theme to what we need, it is trust in what is, essentially, a complicated three-way relationship.

Citizens need to trust that their opinions will be counted and reported fairly. They need to know that the collected opinions have a chance of being seen by The Powers That Be, can positively affect decision-making, and that the process won't be rigged to deny them their input.

Elected and appointed officials, and other authorities, need to trust that the feedback is not only accurate, but documents both total opinion and the opinions of those people directly affected by any given issue (e.g., citizens of Switzerland don't get to vote in our presidential elections).

Finally, technology providers who offer opinion-aggregating services need to trust that if they scrupulously follow a proscribed industry-wide code of conduct they will not be “thrown under the bus” for the results their services report.

Somewhere, sometime soon, the “killer app” will emerge—the American Idol of citizenship, as it were. Whether you agree with the above principles or not, I hope you agree that we need some principles established, and soon, lest somebody else determine the “rules of the game” for the benefit of a few, not the many.

Here are nine principles that will help ensure all three facets of trust described above:

**1. Openness.** Just as anyone can host a blog, run an e-mail server, or put up a web application, anybody should be able to build tools and participate in the aggregation of the resulting data. Conversely, if the aggregation only happens on a single, proprietary site, trust is broken due to lack of transparency. Everyone must be able to cast a vote on any issue. Determining which votes are from people with “a horse in the race” must be done after the fact, since screening beforehand could be applied indiscriminately and shut down useful opinions.

**2. Public.** Not only must issues be publicly visible, but so must the votes, in the same way that blog entries and comments are publicly visible. This is the key to supporting the first principle. Because the votes are public, anybody can build an aggregator to report results or verify the reported results of others. However, if nobody can validate the voting, trust is broken (witness the hullabaloo over voting machine flaws).

**3. Standing.** Some issues may be tied to a specific locality, such as whether or not a traffic light is needed at some town’s main intersection. There needs to be the means to determine if the voter has standing on that issue (e.g., is a resident of the town) in order to cast a vote. This will enable authorities to trust that the results accurately reflect their citizens’ input.

**4. Nyms.** The third principle notwithstanding, people should be able to vote anonymously, even though it may mean their standing cannot be proven and hence their vote may “count less.” People should also be able to vote under pseudonyms, with a “standing provider” empowered to indicate if the pseudonym has standing for some community. And people should be able to make their votes public, tied to their own identity, if they so choose, so as to use peer pressure to encourage more participation. Citizens need to trust that their visibility is under their own control, not the control of some outside party.

**5. Framing.** Anybody should be able to raise an issue using a group process to organize and synthesize related issues. If only pollsters,

government officials, or other privileged people are allowed to raise issues, trust is broken, since the framing of the question is a critical component for evaluating the resulting public opinion (push polls, anyone?)

**6. Structure.** Countability is central to trust: the public needs to see how their opinions can be counted, and authorities need to trust they won't get swamped with too much input that is too difficult to digest. Different voting methods can be used according to the specific issue (e.g., multiple choice), and voters need to spell out their selection in addition to any prose the voter wishes to provide.

**7. Unencumbered.** There must be no requirements of anyone providing issues, positions, or technology to the online opinion gathering system. This will not be possible if the system requires licensing patents or trademarks, or if the system requires technology providers to submit to some form of evaluation before they can participate. These kinds of requirements might serve to concentrate power into too few hands.

**8. Unimpeded.** Since the whole point of the exercise is for the citizens to provide input to the government, there can be no government interference in collection and reporting, lest the citizens lose trust in the process over fears of censorship or manipulation of results.

**9. Self-Policing.** Since anyone can participate (principle #1) and the government cannot interfere (principle #8), the system must provide culture, conventions, and community to help ensure that citizens can easily participate. Rules that might prevent “trolls” from participating will weaken trust, as those rules could be applied to others—and one person's troll could be another person's position advocate.

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### *About the Author*

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