

SIDEWALKS FOR DEMOCRACY ONLINE

Steven L. Clift

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Government websites don't have sidewalks, newspaper racks, public hearing rooms, hallways or grand assemblies. There are no public forums or meeting places in the heart of representative democracy online.

The question that this essay will ask and answer is not what can we do to redesign democracy for the Internet Age, but, rather, why have we decided to delete democracy from the most visited interface citizens have with “their” government? And what are we going to do about it?

After almost two decades of “e-democracy,” we seem content with simply accelerating online what's already wrong with politics. We raise money online to support more political television ads, we “democratize” national partisan punditry through blogs aimed at influencing mass media agendas, and whip up outrage through e-advocacy campaigns that fall into the electronic trash cans of Congress. Online news,

campaigns, forums, blogs and other online social networks may appear public, but are ultimately privately controlled spaces where only the owner has real freedom.

Representative democracy is based on geography, on people connecting with one another locally to react to and influence government. And yet, rarely does anything truly interactive happen online that enables citizens to jointly solve problems or to get directly involved in efforts to make their communities better. Democratic participation online is having the effect of disconnecting us from our physical place in the world, to our collective demise.

The typical e-government experience is like walking into a barren room with a small glass window, a singular experience to the exclusion of other community members. There is no human face, just a one-way process of paying your taxes, registering for services, browsing the information that the government chooses to share, or leaving a private complaint that is never publicly aired. You have no ability to speak with a person next to you much less address your fellow citizen browsers as a group. As I've said for years, it is ironic that the best government websites are those that collect your taxes, while those that give you a say on how your taxes are spent are the worst or simply do not exist.

That said, around the world and in my hometown, I've seen transformative episodes where the online medium is used to build stronger communities. I've given "e-democracy" speeches to governments (and others) interested in using the Internet to improve democracy and citizen participation across 27 countries. In 1994, I helped create the world's first election information website, E-Democracy.Org. Through these experiences, I've been inspired by a small collection of "democracy builders" who are toiling on the edge of e-politics or dodging the grip of "services first, democracy later" e-government projects. The generational challenge we face in designing democracy to survive (perhaps even thrive) online is to identify the incremental contributions

the Internet can make when democratic intent is applied to it and then to make those tools, features, practices, and rights universally accessible to all people in all cities, states, and countries.

Big Ideas for the Next Decade

We know the Internet can connect people with ideas like no medium in history. It can raise voices, share experiences, distribute knowledge, and engage people. The challenge is building a local “anywhere, any time” representative democracy, perhaps paradoxically, through globally shared models and tools.

Government needs the capacity to listen to and engage people online to settle conflicts among the loudest and most powerful voices in society as well as to engage everyday people. We desperately need tools and techniques that provide a counterbalance to the politics of divisiveness and vitriol. We need places for civility and decorum online as all of our public life, particularly politics, substantially moves online.

I am an optimist at heart and every day I try to do something positive for democracy online. So, if I had a million dollars, make that, one hundred million dollars, to invest in the future of democracy online over the next decade, here is what I would do:

1. Make The Internet a Democracy Network by Nature

Because representative democracy is based on geography, content created by citizens must be identified by place instead of simply organized by issue. Content, from a news story to an online comment to a picture or video, needs to automatically be assigned (or “tagged”) with a geographic place. In addition, content bounded by a state or region or identified as global will be essential.

New content must be easily searched and aggregated for community-level display. As neighbors gravitate to talk about local issues online, so

will our elected representatives tap our public pulse online. To catalyze this idea, I'd work with large open source, user-generated content producing systems such as Drupal, Plone, Joomla, MediaWiki and WordPress. Within months, a new dynamic universe of content and interactivity for us to navigate and connect to by place would exist.

2. Connecting Locally Based on Common Public Interests

In the past fifty years, as shopping malls have privatized the historic public space of Main Street, we've lost something. Today's commercial online social networks do little more than "publicize" private life. Real "public life," be it local, national, or global, needs accessible and useful public places online (be they legally "public" or functionally public with restrictions on censorship or arbitrary control by the legal owner).

Local online news sites connect communities with shared local news experiences. However, almost all online social networking experiences that people have with their friends and family online are about private life. We need to invest significantly in efforts that encourage people to connect locally based on common interests and issues, not just globally based on highly specialized interests. We don't need to build any more echo chambers.

3. Restore and Deepen Access to Representative Democracy and Governance Through New Laws and Online Public Hearings

Let's embrace the ideal of government "of, by and for" the people. Let's seize this Internet moment to build trust in our government through public interactions tied to decision-making as well as through transparency and the active dissemination of information.

We can build "sidewalks," or at least "limited public forums" in legalese, on government websites by authorizing external links to related resources so government websites are not dead-ends. Open meeting and other laws must be changed to require the proactive use of

the Internet for information dissemination and notification. I'd fund the creation of open source tools to support "online public hearings." Imagine starting with a standardized online "democratic pulse" (used by all governments) of all public meetings with schedules, agendas, minutes, handouts, and digital recordings. Then add the ability to share your own e-testimony for 48 hours after the in-person meeting. People could then rate or comment on the testimony of others (with civility and decorum requirements) to help us focus our scarce attention time on the most useful submissions.

Taking this a step further, if we really believe in a government that is owned by the people, how can any public information remain offline? While the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) continues to have its place, I predict a fundamental shift: By default, all taxpayer-funded government information from a memo by a township clerk to the town board to ethics filing by Members of Congress, will be available online. Period. That's it. Only legally narrowly defined private or secret information, such as military and national security information, will be offline. Sound fanciful? Estonia already has such a document register in operation. Perhaps a distrust of government power built over 50 years of communism has allowed them to leapfrog our democracy.

4. Restoring the Bonds of Community

When I was a child and my father had cancer, I remember neighbors coming to our assistance in our time of need. Today, with modern life keeping neighbors as strangers, we must use these new tools to break down barriers to community. You deserve the right to easily e-mail your immediate neighbors the morning after you've been burglarized without having to go door-to-door to collect e-mail addresses. We can balance safety and privacy with selective public disclosure of such personal contact information with an intelligent "unlisted to most" directory option that is not the all or nothing of today.

This is big “C” community and small “d” democracy. A collection of better-connected blocks, tied to broader neighborhood and community-wide online efforts will serve as the vibrant foundation we need for accountable and effective representative democracy right up to the Congress and president. You cannot force everyone to be neighborly, but the bonds of community can be restored and nurtured despite dual income families and the assault on time for community involvement.

I am helping build an online neighborhood forum that will soon connect 10% of the households daily (in an area with 10,000 residents) where I live in Minneapolis. Every neighborhood should have an online space (see links to E-Democracy.Org’s Issues Forums and projects like Vermont’s Front Porch Forum, and the academic i-Neighbors project from E-Democracy.Org/nf). We also need tools that allow people who live within a block of one another to connect many-to-many in secure, semi-public ways. This builds on the simple directory idea above and extends it to support all sorts of exchanges, from babysitting referrals to communicating as a group with city hall about potholes.

Small Actions We Can All Take Today

I have shared some big ideas that will help us make progress over the long term. But what can each one of us do now, today, to restore our democracy?

A. Join or create place-based forums or blogs for your neighborhood or community.

Recruit 100 people, require the use of real names, and open up your own local forum. Learn more at E-Democracy.Org/if. Be sure to give people a choice to participate by e-mail or online.

B. Work with your elected officials to introduce legislation requiring all public meetings to be announced on the Internet.

Updating open meeting laws to first require announcements, then agendas, handouts, digital recording, is a good starting point. Learn more at DoWire.Org.

C. Tag the content you produce with geographic terms or “geo tag” if you are technically inclined.

Add geographic tags to the content you share at every opportunity, whether you simply tag your blog post “Minnesota” so it shows up on WordPress.com or tag a video uploaded to YouTube. Learn more from our E-Democracy.Org/voices experiment.

We Have The Power And Obligation To Redesign Democracy

The democratic potential of this new medium has hit the grinder of partisan politics around the world. Too often in politics, the primary engine of innovation is the quest for media attention and power rather than real openness or a desire for democratic deliberation and engagement. No matter who wins in this 2008 “e-election,” the new president will likely and immediately turn off the interactivity that helped to get them elected. Hopefully I am wrong and we will see White House 2.0 alongside Community 2.0.

About the Author

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