

SMALL “d” DEMOCRACY

Susan Crawford

“ We should not discount the power of minor, visible, short-lived actions of Americans to make our lives more significant and to change democratic institutions. ”

We Americans are just trying to get by. Abstract ideas about democracy and the notion of civic engagement aren't as interesting and sticky as we professors might like. We're a busy people.

Every once in a while, though, Americans rise to the democratic occasion on their own, without needing a how-to guide to democratic ideals. They serve proudly on a jury, they wait patiently in line to vote, or they go to a neighborhood meeting and listen, arms folded. We feel, I think, a solemn impulse that this is the right thing to do. We wear a button, work on a campaign—why?

Here, I think, is why, and it points to what the Internet can facilitate. A significant life is one in which ideals are somehow linked to courage, will, or action. When we act in accordance with democratic ideals of participation or representation, we make our lives more sig-

nificant, and we feel this uprush of solemnity and citizenship. We exist, we have liberty, and if enough of us are interested in a particular person or issue we can exert change.

This may be too simple, but if I had the power to redesign our form of government I would make it far easier for ideals to be joined to action, and I would use the Internet to do it. Attention is the most valuable currency we have these days, and the great benefit (and, often, burden) of online communication is that it makes it possible to divide our attention into slender slices. We can read about politics, catch up on sports scores, find a news story, and talk to friends on Facebook almost simultaneously. If it were possible to pay attention every once in a while, between elections, to what our representatives or agency heads were about to do in an area of interest to us—and register our reaction to that proposed action—that would be useful.

This is a modest goal. Americans want to feel that our lives have been made more significant through participation in governance. Voting in elections is important, but it is not enough, and it need not be the ceiling for participation. With a little experimentation, we could be doing much more for ourselves.

For example: localities could generate radar-screens of issues coming before the city council or the mayor. With the weather report (something everyone seems to be interested in) on a local page could come a small radar visualization, with pulsing dots showing what matters were likely to have an effect on your neighborhood. If you were interested, you could click through and do a short amount of reading—perhaps just Twitter-length—about what was about to happen. And then act in some effective way (such as sharing the information with others, writing about it, or showing up at the meeting), with feedback showing how your action had been assessed/aggregated by others.

Easier communication with legislators or agency-actors could help facilitate that uprush of active citizenship. That uprush will be

strengthened when we can see the aggregated response of our neighbors and the resulting government response. Identifying public advocacy opportunities, such as chances to testify, would help—again, with feedback. These very simple and relatively minor actions can change lives and our institutions of government in powerful, nonlinear, and surprising ways. The opportunity to see results, to know that others are joining with you, is possible online.

Each essay like this has just one idea, and here is the idea of this one: We should not discount the power of minor, visible, short-lived actions of Americans to make our lives more significant and to change democratic institutions. Indeed, the change forced by these individual actions may be unpredictable and enormous, and that is as it should be. We should do whatever we can to make it easier for Americans to choose to spend some of their precious attention on democratic matters without having to devote their lives to deliberation. The Internet makes these kinds of visible interventions possible.

About the Author

Susan Crawford is currently a Visiting Professor of Law at Yale Law School, teaching Internet law and communications law. Last term (fall 2007), she was a visiting professor at the University of Michigan Law School, and starting on July 1, 2008 she will join the faculty at Michigan. She is a member of the board of directors of ICANN and is the founder of OneWebDay, a global Earth Day for the Internet that takes place each Sept. 22.