

# PARTICIPATION AS SUSTAINABLE COOPERATION IN PURSUIT OF PUBLIC GOALS

Yochai Benkler

“ Large-scale collaboration, among widely-dispersed populations, is manageable, sustainable, and effective. ”

The networked information economy changes a set of physical facts and enables a cultural trend, which could make an appreciable difference in the basic architecture of participation in contemporary democracies. The physical capital necessary for effective production and communication of information, knowledge, and culture is widely distributed in the population. Processors, storage, communications capacity, as well as audio and video sensors, are now in the hands of everyone with a computer or mobile phone. This means that the practical limitations on large-scale collaboration among geographically and socially dispersed people have been dramatically reduced.

Domains of action that require the acquisition of information; its organization and analysis; its production into knowledge structures

and structures of meaning; and the capacity to tell stories about how things are and how they might become no longer depend on access to significant material capital resources. Individuals can act socially in ways that traditionally had local effects with little economic or political salience, but now can have significant effects in both social and economic-political domains. These technical and social facts have given rise to a cultural trend of greater engagement in individual and collective social action aimed to achieve results in the world without going through the traditional structures of effective action, power, and authority that typified industrial society. This is how we got free or open-source software, which practically anyone who uses e-mail, browses websites, writes blogs or edits wikis uses without even knowing it, because it is what runs major portions of these services. This is how we got Wikipedia. This is how we got YouTube, MySpace and Facebook.

Two critical points emerge out of the experience of the networked information economy. First, people can, with relatively moderate and manageable levels of effort, come together to act effectively on problems that they could not tackle in the past. Second, people can and do work cooperatively together, needing neither markets nor hierarchies, governmental or otherwise, to organize them. Large-scale collaboration, among widely-dispersed populations, is manageable, sustainable, and effective.

This is a new and important realization. It can be, and in many instances already is being, applied to problems of democratic governance: from the construction of the public sphere, through the harnessing of cooperative models for implementing government oversight on an ongoing basis, to harnessing peer production to define problems and solutions for public action.

**The networked public sphere.** The mass-mediated public sphere used to concentrate the production of stories about who we are, what

challenges face us, and how we might overcome them. The public at large was reduced to passivity in this model of production; we were no more than “eyeballs.” The networked public sphere is comprised of e-mails and e-mail lists, blogs ranging from individual thoughts to professional and semi-professional new voices like Instapundit or Talking Points Memo, to vast collaboration platforms like DailyKos with thousands of contributors, or flash campaigns that re-purpose other platforms, like the Burma campaign on Facebook. A dozen or more years of experience with the networked public sphere has taught us a lot about how it can operate. It is not, it turns out, the republic of yeoman authors that some hoped it would be. But neither is it the trackless cacophony of antagonistic echo chambers that others predicted. Instead, we have seen a public sphere where millions, rather than hundreds or thousands, can participate in setting the agenda, filtering what is important, and telling our common stories. Not everyone; but a large and significant change from where we were a mere decade ago.

The most visible successes of the networked public sphere have been in the domain of playing watchdog. Older stories from the past half decade are well known: the critique of Diebold voting machines; the CBS/Dan Rather report on George Bush’s military record; the debates that led to Trent Lott’s resignation. More recently, Josh Marshall at Talking Points Memo uncovered the U.S. Attorney purge that resulted in Alberto Gonzales’s resignation. A collaboration initiated by Porkbusters, and ultimately encompassing blogs on both sides of the American political blogosphere, mobilized readers to investigate the identity of a senator who secretly blocked legislation that required more transparency in government spending, an investigation which successfully identified the culprit and forced removal of the block. Recently, we have begun to see organizations like the Sunlight Foundation provide better tools for collaborative production of the watchdog function. This foundation funds projects that take govern-

ment data and collate and render it in platforms that allow citizens to collaborate on investigating and identifying problems about which they particularly care.

Both the rise of networked debate and the rise of a peer-produced watchdog function characterize a vastly different role and level of mobilization for citizens than was typical as recently as a decade ago. The social distance between any citizen and someone who can speak and be heard by a substantial community has shrunk. Instead of six degrees of separation, it is now no more than one or two. As we walk around with video cameras in our pockets (our mobile phones), we can capture images and sounds and expect to be seen and heard, as we never could before. As these capabilities increase, we are already seeing, and will likely continue to see, a shift in attitude—from passive acceptance of forces greater than ourselves, to a sense that what we see, care about, and say could become the subject of a broader community of concern and action. And this attitudinal change is the linchpin to the possibility of a change in practice.

**New forms of engaged collaboration.** The next phase in the integration of large-scale cooperation into democracy will come when we begin to use platforms for collecting, filtering, and refining proposals for action and active contributions. It is simplest to imagine this occurring at the level of local government. People living their day-to-day lives encounter a multitude of obstacles and overcome them using diverse solutions. Some problems cannot be solved systematically. Some can, but require attention and effort unavailable to local governments. Developing systems that allow people to report problems, offer solutions, vet them, compare solutions across municipalities, and propose action could overcome the limited resources at the local level. On the free-software model, everyone is a beta tester of their own physical environment, and all bugs can be fixed in that environment if enough people look at the problem. Taking this approach to the national level,

there is no reason that federal agencies cannot implement similar systems. We now have the Patent and Trademark Office experimenting with the Peer-to-Patent system, which gives patent applicants fast-track treatment if they submit their patent application to community peer review, which in turn advises the patent examiners on whether the patent is indeed novel and nonobvious. (Please see Beth Simone Noveck's essay beginning on page 192 to learn more about the Peer-to-Patent system.) There is no reason the Federal Communications Commission could not implement a similar platform for its decisions, such as in the area of wireless communications regulation, or why states and the federal government cannot create effective platforms for teachers to participate in the development of teaching materials, or to connect schools to volunteers to help with reading, math, and history.

Implementing such systems is complicated. There are risks of cacophony, strategic gaming, and incompetence. And yet these were once objections to the plausibility of Wikipedia or free software. We have found ways to avoid both malevolence and incompetence in large-scale collaborations, without re-introducing a hierarchy that disempowers most citizens. And that is what we must do in designing systems for citizen participation in the ongoing process of managing our collective lives.

While the implementation may be far from simple, the basic principle is. The widespread distribution of physical capital necessary to produce our information environment has triggered a set of new cultural practices oriented around effective, active social cooperation on a wide range of activities, including the provision of important public goods. This new culture is not yet universal, but is growing rapidly as the number of people who have edited a Wikipedia article, uploaded a video to YouTube, or commented or tagged a post increases. This cultural shift in self-perception, from passive couch potato to active

participant in collaborative practices for making one's own information universe, opens the opportunity for a more robust, sustainable level of involvement by citizens in the governance of their society. It allows us to move from the minimal implementation of universal participation as the formal right of suffrage, to constructing platforms that will actually engage people in effective, sustainable efforts aimed toward identifying our differences and commonalities, and acting together to further our common good.

---

#### *About the Author*

Yochai Benkler is the Berkman Professor of Entrepreneurial Legal Studies at Harvard, and faculty co-director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Before joining the faculty at Harvard Law School, he was Joseph M. Field '55 Professor of Law at Yale. He is the author of *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (Yale Press 2006).