

# TO: MICAH L. SIFRY, PERSONAL DEMOCRACY FORUM 2008

Zack Exley

“Therefore, more than anything we will try to build the ethic of true leadership not only into the American political system, but into the American spirit.”

TO: Micah L. Sifry, Personal Democracy Forum 2008  
FROM: Micah L. Sifry, Personal Democracy Forum 2058  
SUBJECT: Leadership

Dear Micah,

This e-mail has been delivered to your inbox via Google Time Machine from the year 2058. I'm writing to share the results of an incredible experiment, inspired by your Rebooting Democracy project and carried out on its 50th anniversary. It is extremely important that you recover from the shock of receiving this e-mail and act on my recommendations as quickly as you can. As it turns out, you and your Personal Democracy Forum buddies are better positioned to save American democracy than even the Founding Fathers.

So, I have some good news for you and some bad news. First the

good news: In the biotech revolution of the 2020s, you and your Personal Democracy Forum (PDF) business partner Andrew Rasiej invent the “Bionet,” a network of wireless brain implants that connects all of humanity in one continuous, decentralized and unmediated conversation.

The Bionet began as a gimmick at the Personal Democracy Forum of 2022. You were only trying to give people an enhanced way of making snarky comments behind panelists’ backs instead of the on-screen back channel chats that had become too linear and uninteresting. But conference goers refused to give up their Bionet headsets, and found infinite uses for this new “mental telepathy” in the wider world. You and Andrew became fantastically wealthy. But I’m pleased to report that before anyone even had the chance to grumble about a proprietary network of human consciousness, you made the Bionet protocol an open standard—from the data abstraction layer all the way down to the headset specs.

Today, most people around the world have their Bionets implanted at birth, along with other biological enhancements. Market penetration is effectively 100% because the benefits to businesses of providing implants to workers and farmers to monitor their brain activities and thoughts far outweigh the cost of subsidies for the poor.

I wish I had time to explain all the political upheaval, wars and economic chaos of the past five decades. But I’ll have to stick to the changes brought by the Bionet. Basically, it’s turned the whole world into one giant “Personal Democracy Forum,” in the truest sense of that phrase.

As you and many of our friends predicted, in a hyper-networked world, the state has become less and less necessary. The Bionet made instant secret ballot voting as easy as daydreaming. In 2032, the Bionet re-vote resolved the surreal election debacle between Karenna Gore and George P. Bush. It was only a matter of time before “mind voting” was used for every social decision great and small. A mind vote cost nothing, and took only a few seconds to conduct. Rudimentary artificial

intelligence even made it possible to enable the Bionet to vote for you automatically on most issues. Any time politicians were making unpopular decisions, pressure would build for mind votes. And because mind voting was so easy, it was difficult to argue against conducting one.

Naturally, there were problems. In fact, our nascent system of instant, continuous mind voting in the United States helped to cause World War III. Just a matter of growing pains, we thought. And so, Lawrence Lessig's first action as prime minister of the post-war World Parliament (long story!) was passing the "Personal Democracy Act of 2042." The law abolished politicians and delegated all policy making to direct, instant "Personal Democracy."

In that same year, Thomas Friedman published his bestselling book "The World is a Point," arguing that the Bionet had effectively eliminated distance, personal space, and any useful personal boundaries. He argued that the problem was not that there was too much instantaneous, decentralized decision-making, but not enough. He urged the have-nots of the world to metaphorically wear what he called "the cellophane business suit" (a follow up to his concept from the old Globalization Debate of the "Golden Straight Jacket" wherein, according to Friedman, all nations had to accept the new rules of a global economy including fair trade and transparency).

The Personal Democracy Act did not have the intended results. In the press, a lot of the problems were blamed on the fact that such a high proportion of us in government were long past our "expiration date." But trust me, we're all sharper now than we ever were with our old biological brains. Though it's true, some of us did give them reason to wonder. Press Secretary Joe Trippi's immortal words, "Don't worry, this will fix everything!" became the slogan for just how out of touch we Americans were with reality. Minister of Industry Yochai Benkler, with his slogan, "All Power to the Network!" became more and more dogmatic against any sort of industrial or agricultural planning. The

results were immediate, dramatic and disastrous. First, there were the mass famines and ecological catastrophe of the “Great Leap Inward.” Benkler’s unfortunate televised comment, “Let them figure it out for themselves!” joined “Let them eat cake!” on the short list of historic phrases that sparked full-blown revolutions.

However, because government had virtually withered away, the revolutionary mobs in the street found that they had no one to rebel against but themselves. Mind vote followed mind vote on thousands of different economic policies and schemes to no end. We found it was very easy to vote against pollution, but impossible to vote a replacement non-polluting industry into being. We found it was easy to vote against exploitative trade, but much more difficult to vote for a means of making a living for poor countries when we stopped trading with them.

I can’t even bring myself to write down the figures associated with the economic, agricultural and ecological failures of the past 15 years. I’ll just say that it made the carnage of Mao’s Great Leap Forward look like a minor hiccup.

In reaction, an overly authoritarian camp rose up in politics (or rather, what was left of politics). David Weinberger, after a transformation reminiscent of Mussolini’s turn from socialism to fascism, became its intellectual leader. Zack Exley served as iron-fisted party leader. But we kept our faith that “too much democracy” could not be the problem.

Facing the failure of our efforts at Personal Democracy, we laid blame on the doorstep of history. The ability to “figure it out for themselves,” we decided, had been stolen from humanity by the centuries during which people were forced to live without the liberating effects of Personal Democracy.

And so we hatched an idea. We would bring the Framers of the 1787 Constitution to the present day and show them the disastrous results of their old-fashioned, “top-down” democracy. We would then send them

back with millions of Bionet headsets so that they could “reboot democracy” and jump start progress toward a Personal Democracy utopia.

We knew that changing the past would erase our present, but with billions of people starving and war waging all around the world, we believed it was worth the sacrifice.

With the whole world watching through their Bionet mind’s eye, Constitution Hall was teleported to the present with all of the Founders inside. If you think you were shocked by the arrival of this e-mail, just imagine how those guys felt at their arrival in a fantastic world of the future.

It took a while, but they finally got over their shock and accepted the new reality that had been presented to them. After caucusing alone, their appointed leader George Washington told us that the group wanted a chance to read up on the events of our history (and their future). We told them that they could take as long as they liked and we would transport them back to the very same instant from which we plucked them when we were done.

During their study, they kept their deliberations secret from our world in the same way that they had kept their constitutional deliberations secret from their world. We were impatient, but no one was going to argue when George Washington told us, “Remove yourselves from our premises!”

Two months passed. Then America’s Founding Fathers presented the world, via the Bionet, with their findings. The group chose Alexander Hamilton as their spokesperson, because he had mastered the terminology and the ways of the modern world better and faster than anyone else in the group. More brains, in more languages, tuned in to Hamilton’s speech than to any other event in the history of the Bionet (save for the unveiling of Madonna’s new body in 2051).

“Dear Sirs,” he said (showing he hadn’t mastered every aspect of 21<sup>st</sup> century culture), “On behalf of my colleagues of the 1787 Con-

stitutional Convention, I thank you for giving us this opportunity to study our future—your past—toward the aim of improving it.

“We now understand that the stakes of our enterprise were higher than any of us imagined: Our United States of America will go on to have a greater impact on the world than any other nation during these three centuries. And yet, in our time it does not even call itself one nation. We do see that we made many errors as we laid down the foundation for this new country.

“But we do not accept your conclusion that this ‘personal democracy’ is any solution for our age...or yours. First of all, we do not hold democracy to be a panacea or an end in itself. We set out to create a republic based on the non-negotiable principles of ‘Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.’ We believed that democracy was the best means to that end.

“We knew it was a gamble. We knew that private interests would descend upon our president and Congress as they had upon the Crown and Parliament. That is why we attempted to base our democracy on the hope that a democratically elected aristocracy of merit could replace the old aristocracy of birthright.

“We now see that was folly. We were naïve to think that our complicated system of ‘electors’ could replace the necessity of every generation to find its own leaders, and empower them—’from the bottom up’ as you love to say—to do what must be done. We were looking for a way to make good leadership automatic. But we were wrong to believe we could relieve future generations from that responsibility. We were treating our political system as if it were a mousetrap that merely needed fine-tuning. You have brought us here in the hopes that we would go back and commit that very same folly, but this time with your own ingenious new system instead of ours.

“Today, you have reduced the concept of democracy to the ‘personal’ quest for happiness of twenty billion people, all rushing in

different and often opposing directions. But democracy can never be ‘personal’—it is communal. Democracy is not a way to take care of oneself, but a way to take care of others.

“We risked our lives for that kind of ‘democracy for others.’ But too many of you are not even willing to risk your next promotion or grant.

“In our study of history, we have seen how our children and grandchildren immediately swept away our hopes for disinterested, selfless leadership. Almost instantly they organized into petty political parties that pandered to short-term private interests rather than the long-term common good.

“We have not come up with any answers about what a different system would have done better. After you send us back to Philadelphia, we will consider that issue. But we have drawn one conclusion: We took for granted that our example of selfless leadership would speak for itself and be emulated by future generations. It didn’t. Therefore, more than anything we will try to build the ethic of true leadership not only into the American political system, but into the American spirit. Please wish us luck, just as we will wish you great good fortune and fortitude.”

As we look back through history, we see a precipitous decline in the quality of leadership right at the moment when mass media and the Internet created the greatest opportunities for good leadership.

So, my dear younger self, and all others who are reading this, it is up to us in every generation not just to build a better system in which leadership can function better; it is up to us, above all, to be better leaders. Therefore, you who are living at the dawn of the Networked Age have the greatest responsibility not to abdicate humanity’s right to conscious action to an abstract notion of ‘network,’ but instead to use the powerful networks available to you as good leaders.

Good luck!

Yours in great hope,

Micah

---

*About the Author*

Zack Exley is a strategic consultant with ThoughtWorks, Inc., where he advises organizations on communications, organizing and technology. He is also a co-founder and president of the New Organizing Institute. He directed the online campaign for the British Labor Party's 2005 re-election, was Director of Online Organizing and Communications at Kerry-Edwards 2004 and served as national organizing director at MoveOn.org.