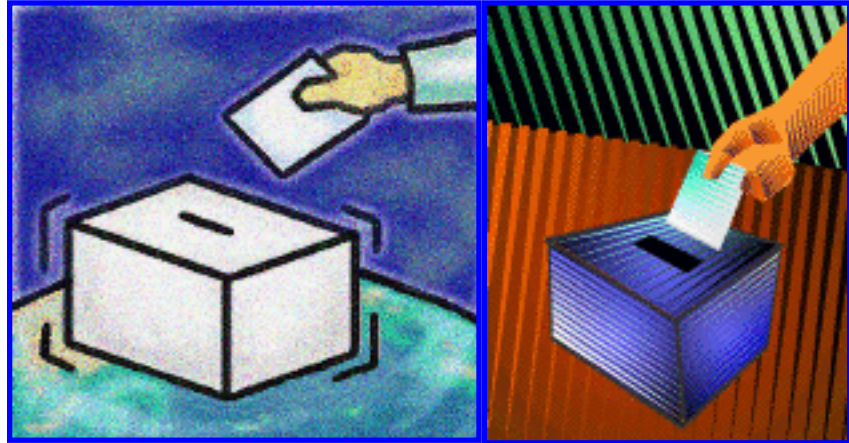


Direct Democracy

Is the United States Prepared?

by [Adam Lake](#)

When the founding fathers were drafting the *Constitution* some two hundred years ago, it would have been impossible for them to imagine the society of today. An email message is whisked away into a giant electron cloud, emerging half a world away in less than a second. Sifting through millions of bytes of data is easy for a novice computer user. The non-linear nature of hypertext documents can employ the general to specific thought process of our mind. The challenge used to be finding the information, the small bits strewn here and there at research libraries and resource centers throughout the world. In the on-line world the information has been put at our fingertips. Now the question is how to sift through the information available to get the information needed.



This empowers the average citizen of this country more than the founding fathers could have envisioned. It isn't so much new abilities which have been gained. What has been gained is a tremendous increase in speed. To send a letter of inquiry to a graduate school used to take weeks. Now an email message can be sent to the school in a matter of milliseconds. Even the letter of inquiry may be unnecessary because simply perusing the World Wide Web will answer most typical questions. This gives the average citizen the potential for a new level of empowerment. With this new empowerment in mind consider the following: will it be possible to harness the potential of cyberspace to fuse the country together into a directly democratic nation?

Part I: Infrastructure and Education

Before this question can be answered, other questions on infrastructure and education must be considered. First, who will control the infrastructure?

Currently there are efforts being made to develop a National Information Infrastructure (NII). The [Information Infrastructure Task Force \(IITF\)](#) states that ``In the future, the NII will enable all Americans to get the information they need, when they need it and where they need it, for an affordable

price." The IITF has stated that the private sector will own and operate the NII and that the Federal government will encourage private sector investment for building and utilizing the NII, as well as create a competitive market for telecommunications and information services. Exactly how will this infrastructure be deployed? Both cable companies and the telephone companies want to lay claim to the NII and both seem overly optimistic in their claims, but their approaches vary. TCI's \$33 billion dollar merger with Bell Atlantic collapsed last year with Bell Atlantic. Now Bell Atlantic is poised to start its own network. Sprint has been buying portions of the Internet. Envisioning the day when all the information a person wants will be accessed through their PC/TV, Microsoft plans to control television sets (and everything else for that matter). According to [*Wired*](#) Magazine, Time Warner had a full service network planned for Orlando in early 1994, but abandoned it after the estimated cost of the set-top control box was discovered to be \$3,000 (first report was \$11,000)!

From this information it seems quite clear that something will eventually come of the NII but nobody seems to know what shape it will take. The IITF has decided to leave this decision to the private sector. The federal government will encourage private sector investment for building and utilizing the NII, as well as create a competitive market for telecommunications and information services.

When the NII is in place, will every American have the same level of access? The Statement of the [**USACM**](#) (the Public Policy Committee of ACM) has endorsed the creation of an NII in the United States. They feel that a wide-reaching infrastructure must guarantee that the system be affordable and accessible to all. In addition, they are making efforts to ensure the protection of information rights including public access and freedom of speech. The USACM also believes ``that connection to the NII should be priced so that there can be universal access to a basic level of service,..... with access made available through public schools and libraries, especially those in disadvantaged neighborhoods."

Should we ask profit motivated corporations to develop the info-highway? What will TCI, Bell-Atlantic, Time-Warner, and Microsoft do to ensure the information which is piped into homes has the potential to be truly enriching or informative? Making money being any businesses primary motivation, it is understandable that these companies will satisfy consumers wants as entertainers and merchants. They will have little reason or want to satisfy the consumers occasional desire for information. Public policy must require access providers to give citizens the information necessary to make informed, impartial decisions.

Will everyone know how to use the proposed information infrastructure? Right now society appears to be dividing into the computer literate and illiterate. As reported in *Newsweek*, the 1993 U.S. census showed that only 15% of families with an income under \$20,000 have computers at home while 74% of families with an income of \$75,000 have a computer at home. Obviously this phenomena creates a barrier for children who are growing up in a society that is only going to increase its reliance on computers.

There are still relatively few people with the resources to access the information available on-line. However, this trend should change with the creation of the NII, providing the initiatives of the USACM

are met. Schools are increasingly aware of the necessity for computer literacy in education. According to Jeanne Hayes of Quality Education Data (as reported in *Newsweek*), 10 years ago schools had 1 computer for every 125 children, today the ratio is 1:12. The majority of these computers have the ability to act as terminals on the existing info-highway. A major investment still needs to be made to bring the hardware and bandwidth necessary to exploit all the resources of the Internet.

With the number of computers at schools increasing and major initiatives in many states to put every school on-line, it is reasonable to assume that within the next 10 years the majority of students will have access to the vast information resources which exist and are growing daily.

When considering direct democracy it can be seen that there would be a problem in trying to implement it today. The concern of a divided society will be a temporary one. Schools see what the next generation of students need and are striving to meet these goals with the same struggles every other organization deals with: neither enough time nor money. While there will be a temporary scare, expect this to be offset in the long term by schools taking appropriate steps toward educating students.

Part II Implementation

It has been shown that there are efforts toward a truly robust information infrastructure that will permit citizens to access resources. Now consider one application of such a system.

Today it is possible to access government records via the Internet. The [White House](#) has a World Wide Web site and many states, including California, Texas, and Minnesota, have plans for all government documents to be on-line. It should only be a matter of time until most state and national documents become available. It's currently possible to download the list of all Senate Bills, House Bills, and all other portions of the Congressional Records. Full text of all legislation is available.

Gaining easy access to this kind of information paves the path for citizens to make their own informed decisions on legislation. Why should we leave control in Washington where citizens feel out of touch and lobbyists sway our decision makers? Everyone will have timely access to the information necessary to make an informed decision (i.e., vote). Should we continue to tie these decisions into the existing bureaucracy, or should we restructure the 200 year old system to better reflect the new America?

One characteristic of a direct democracy system is that everybody would have the chance to be heard. Suppose there was a new obscenity law up for public vote. This would surely qualify as something everyone would have a right to examine. The amendment is posted to the ``Amendment" section of the National Laws bulletin board. Anyone who cares to read it can download it or read it on-line. Discussion for the next few weeks on the National Laws bulletin board is about the proposed law. Then, after 2 weeks a vote is tallied. Based on that vote a decision is made to adopt the ``new and improved" obscenity law.

One might also see some patterns developing. For instance, isn't it conceivable that support would be

easier to gather in favor of an issue than against? Many people will be so busy pushing for the laws they want they may not waste time considering the laws they don't want. Imagine the hundreds of bills that are introduced by the limited number of Congressmen. Imagine giving the ability to introduce new bills to millions of citizens. They could construct a document in their favorite editor and send it off. Can you imagine the wording of these documents at first? Also, imagine the burden of sifting through millions of opinions on complex issues. Who wants to spend the time doing this? Would everyone get a right to veto?

Perhaps there could be checks before a bill is posted, but by who? Who will we have to pay to watch over these bulletin boards? How will we vote on who they are? And how many of these bureaucrats will there be?

Another thing to consider is the security of such a system. We are, after all, trusting the future of a prosperous nation to this new system. In his recent book, *Computer Related Risks*, Peter Neumann explained, "The opportunities for rigging elections [are] child's play for vendors and knowledgeable election officials." Because today's technology is just too vulnerable, an electronic voting system should be something of future interest. Many fear that the fraud of a computer voting system would be more difficult to trace. This is because it is easy to imagine one vote electronically being turned into thousands or even millions. This is more difficult to fathom when there are physical ballots to count. In the future such concerns might be addressed with encryption schemes or methods of tracing votes back to a voter for verification.

Would a direct democracy system eliminate the dreaded lobbyist efforts? Doubtful. It's possible to foresee a world with door-to-door (or email-to-email) lobbyists sending their propaganda to every citizen. Do you think the system is burdensome and costly now with thousands of elected officials in Washington being coerced by lobbyists? Imagine giving them the ability to reach into the minds of every citizen in the country. Would the fact become even more difficult to separate from the fiction than it is today?

In the current representative democracy setting there are elected representatives to represent the majority of the voters in their state, district, etc. These women and men are experienced politicians (granted, this is good and bad) who have made it their career to look out for what is best for their constituency. Anybody who has ever held a leadership position knows that it is impossible to make everyone happy and people are more likely to speak up when something hurts them and take for granted those things which help. These women and men spend their time trying to understand problems and make decisions that would be best for their constituency so citizens don't have to spend their time worrying about these issues.

Conclusions

The prospect of a direct democracy has been briefly considered. It has been shown that the current state of the nation will not support a direct democracy, but as I discussed in Part I, the possibility of such a

system exists. I hope others will examine this issue and think of ways to solve problems which would arise if such a system were put into place. Perhaps it would be reasonable to try the system out with a small group. Town meetings would be an excellent way for candidates to meet with their constituency on-line. The posting of proposed local laws would be another reasonable use of an information infrastructure. Perhaps only those laws pertaining to on-line individuals should be evaluated on-line. For obvious reasons, these are the people more likely to contribute positively to the discussion. One thing is for certain, there are many, many questions that must be considered before direct democracy can be a reasonable goal for the United States.

An article in *Newsweek* called *The Couch Potato Vote* by Jonathan Alter says:

...Technology helps democracy by eroding secrecy; but technology hurts democracy by eroding reflection and time. Yes, the people usually know what's best. It just takes us a little longer than the push of a button to figure it out.

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For more information from the Information Infrastructure Task Force, contact the [IITF](#).

Another invaluable resource is <http://www.fedworld.gov> which gives access to a plethora of government organization's web pages.

The Statement of the USACM is available from <http://www.acm.org/usacm/>.