An Internet of Democracy

Engaging the fundamental structure of the Internet with an eye toward making it a real democracy network.

On a park bench outside Independence Hall in Philadelphia, I sit with my laptop. Ah, the wonders and hype of modern technology. It was here the U.S. Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.

To write about the use of information and communication technology and democracy requires not a hyper-speed view that everything will change in the next two years, but rather it is the principles we establish and the actions we take that will set the course for the next 200 years of democracy in the information age. We must ask ourselves: Do we want to build the Internet into the very nature our many democracies? Or will we maintain the default course where democracy is a burdensome add-on and side application that happens to run on the Internet? Just as we spend time and resources to make the Internet safe for e-commerce, shouldn't we do the same for e-democracy?

Back in 1994, I thought I had invented the term "e-democracy." I was into democracy, email, and Minnesota politics. That election year a group of volunteers created Minnesota E-Democracy, the world's first election-oriented Web site. In recent years I discovered an article from 1987 that used the term, but the point is that citizens spontaneously built something new on top of one of the most important institutions of humankind—democracy. We rolled up our sleeves and did the work required to move beyond the hype toward real results.

While I continue to volunteer with Minnesota E-Democracy, I am also involved in the "convergence of democracy and the Internet" around the world through my Democracies Online effort. I recognize that the social, political, and economic differences in countries, even communities around the world result in many different democracies. Despite these dynamic differences, forms of representation and public decision-making are pulling the Internet and

other information and communication technologies into the heart of what they do. However, from parliaments and local councils to civil society and media groups, the sectors of democracy are primarily focused on the end applications and not the fundamental infrastructure of the Internet.

We need a generation of civic technologists who engage the fundamental infrastructure of the Internet and standards processes in the public interest. We need talented people with an eye toward making the Internet a democracy network by nature. Just as hypertext transfer protocols and mark-up languages enable free speech, what standards could assist electronic free association or geographically based Internet content navigation? Meaningful online speech only seems to occur where people can form sustained audiences or within active online communities. Real democracy is also fundamentally based on geography, yet Web sites are incredibly difficult to navigate and search, making it difficult for people to find information relevant to local community issues.
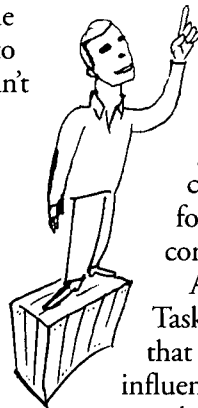
As I have tracked the Internet Engineering Task Force and other technical groups, it is clear that you must have "standing" to contribute or influence these technical meritocracies. It is not enough to believe something should be done and there is no expectation that anyone has a right of representation. Those who want an Internet that works naturally in the public interest and democracy must be engaged with merit in both the development and promotion of Internet standards. We need civic-minded technologists who not only encourage technical developments but also take a lead in developing technical solutions and applications to gain respect, acceptance, and power within the Internet's meritocracy. We need to not only state the justification for a standard or open-source solution, but also write and code solutions that make our technical goals a reality.

MARTIN MAYO

○ Viewpoint

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Let me be bit more specific. Some of the projects and ideas I'd like to see include:

1. *Open Group* (opengroups.org). This is my first attempt to introduce the development of a technical effort with revolutionary implications for public online communities and free electronic association. I have found through experience that the most transformative aspect of the Internet in democracy is many-to-many communication. While the vast majority of online communities have nothing to do with political issues or local community affairs, many do. The problem is that it is almost impossible for the average Internet user to find, evaluate, and join these forums. Open Groups would create an XML standard for describing online groups, the ability to integrate this standard into email list, Web forum, and chat server software as well a mechanism to gather and share this data.

2. *Representative Democracy Online Toolkit.* This set of applications would seek to use Internet standards and open-source software where possible to aide the integration of the Internet into formal representative processes. While not fundamentally designed to create new Internet standards, it would be focused on using Internet-style collaboration across governments and academic centers to build inexpensive and robust software tools for representative bodies around the world. Example applications might include Email Response, an advanced incoming email filtering and response aide; Virtual Hearing, a system that enables physical public hearings to be made fully available in real time online (including handouts and support materials) as well as allow Internet-based testimony; and Public Notice, a system to announce all public meetings and agendas online within a given geographic jurisdiction.

3. *Digital Datacasting.* With digital television emerging around the world, the opportunity to provide universal access to the most essential public service information is upon us. Along the lines of teletext in Europe and the public access cable television model in the U.S., datacasting of text, images, audio, and video as part of the DTV broadcast stream will make the best of the public Internet content available to those without a two-way Internet connection. It will also allow the television and set-top box to be used for quick access to important government and community information such as missing children alerts, crime alerts, weather warnings, school lunch menus, and community calendars. To build such a standards-based effort will require substantial development and political resources to merge the best of Internet development with the controversial area of broadcast standards and regulations.

THESE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE IDEAS I HAVE WITH significant technical requirements. I am sure you have many more. After the signing of the Declaration of Independence it took 11 years until the U.S. Constitution was signed. Those who care about an "e-democracy" need to move from our declarations of interests and ideals and now shape the Internet's standards-based constitution. We want an Internet that technically supports the nature of the democracies we want so the individual and group freedoms, rights, and responsibilities required to build a better world are the foundation and not the exception of the digital era.

I often refer to myself as a "radical incrementalist." I believe we need to take small actions based on our ideal of what the Internet ought to be or could be now instead of waiting for it to happen all at once based on some grand plan. In the end, as "e-citizens" we want to take action in our own communities as well as globally in Internet technical circles. Let us contribute by sharing our successes and failures with our peers along the way and build an Internet that is "of" democracy and not settle for surviving remnants of current democracy struggling to simply exist "on" an antidemocratic Internet. **C**

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