

The Internet and Democracy

by
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New telecommunications technology most notably, the Internet is going to have an effect on global society that dwarfs the powerful influence that television has had in contemporary times. In a recent Wall Street Journal article, Dr. Bruce Merkin, with the urging of his local health system, has suggested that his patients place their medical records on the Internet in order to provide them with more readily available services. This past spring, the Apollo-Ridge School District applied for a state grant to give free unlimited Internet access to students and parents as a means of educational empowerment. At a convention of Minnesota bankers in Minneapolis this past week, I listened to speakers that were conducting investment transactions and electronic money transfers over the Internet. And finally, each month these articles are transmitted from my computer through the Internet, onto this newspaper.

While health, education, commerce and the news media are all being transformed in some ways by this pervasive technology, a new unseen transformation is taking root that may shake the very foundation of the US constitution. It begins with electronic voting and the likely evolution of electronic representation.

Voter disillusionment with present-day politics may be at an all-time high as evidenced by the disgracefully low voter participation in recent years. While the reasons for voter apathy can be debated, it seems apparent that a new voter delivery system would likely increase voter participation. Everyone should deeply revere the freedom won by those who fought and died before us. No eligible voter should ever miss going to the polls. But in this age of drive-up services, fax machines and ATM's, voting electronically at home with a PIN number should be an option. Will there be abuses? Certainly but they will be overcome. Will everyone have access? Anyone with a telephone or computer will have access. Its not a question of "if", its a question of "when". Voting electronically will then be the spark that will set off a chain reaction of events that may change democracy as we know it.

Back in the eighteenth century, some philosophers believed that the only true form of democracy was the general meeting of all citizens in an assembly. Today that reality is beginning to unfold in some corners of the electronic universe. People are gathering together expressing themselves and trading ideas in forums across the computers of the world. Formal and informal polls are being tabulated by a number of organizations including CNN through the Net.

Today's telecommunications technology has tremendous potential to serve the needs of democracy. Currently, some politicians including the President are starting to take the pulse of the electorate via Internet electronic mail on most issues. My experience has been that communicating to on-line savvy politicians through the Internet is far more

effective than writing a letter or placing a call. In a couple years all of Congress will be on-line so that they can receive instant feedback from constituents.

Thus, it will not be long before members of Congress push for a national policy granting universal Internet access. It will happen before the end of this century. It surely will happen before the Apollo bridge eyesore gets painted. When access becomes freely universal, the question of democratic representation becomes a real issue.

Where a geographically large area once made it impossible for citizens to gather together in one place to decide what their collective interests were, technology will make it possible. Its conceivable that we could have an elected legislative body that introduces bills and another body made of every citizen that wishes to participate that approves these bills. Where do special interest groups go when we the people have the ability to literally represent ourselves? Where do foreign lobbyists go when we the people decide to represent ourselves? Where do frivolous amendments attached to good bills go when we the people actually get to view and vote the bills on our own?

New telecommunications technology is like the theorized meteor that hit the earth in prehistoric times. It will change life as we know it, even democracy. We either adapt or get left in the primordial ooze.



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