Realising Democracy Online:
A Civic Commons in Cyberspace

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CitizensOnline

Citizens Online is a not-for-profit, independent organisation, established to explore the social and cultural impact of the Internet, to implement positive action to bridge the so-called Digital Divide, and to promote the benefits of Universal Internet Access.

Citizens Online is pledged to working in partnership with Government, Industry, Voluntary and Community organisations, to bring together the resources and expertise across all sectors to ensure that those who do not have access to the Internet, for whatever reason, have the opportunities to do so if they so wish.

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We will work with research organisations to establish a clear picture of where to invest their efforts in the UK and extend programmes aimed at providing and improving access and use of the Internet in society.

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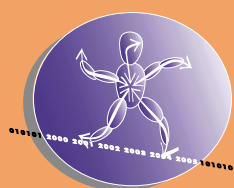
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Overview

This is the second in a series of IPPR/Citizens Online papers exploring the social and democratic role of new media.

Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace is a proposal to create an enduring structure which could fulfil the democratic potential of the new interactive media.

Series Editor – Damian Tambini - IPPR

Foreword

In an age when every conceivable activity is prefixed with an E or suffixed Online, what is the role for the new technologies in promoting democracy?

This publication, co-authored by Jay Blumler and Stephen Coleman, and published jointly by IPPR and Citizens Online, examines the potential of the Internet to encourage and foster new forms of public involvement in civic and political affairs.

To many people the mention of e-Democracy conjures up visions of electronic polling stations and on-line referendums, but whilst these may have a part to play in the future, a more pressing objective is to maximise the opportunities for public participation in governance.

It is widely recognised that all is not well in the political communication system, where sound bites and spin have replaced the hustings, and incentives for citizens to become involved are in short supply. Diverse channels for distributing the news are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and they are hungry for content. It is on the one hand harder for citizens to cope with the constant flow of information on any given subject, and yet easier for them to find a distraction amongst the hundreds of other programmes on offer.

There has also been a decline in the levels of trust between the public and politicians. So many scandals and resignations have diminished the deference that once existed, and in this consumer age there is an expectation of instant results often received with scepticism and cynicism.

So is new technology the solution? The Internet certainly isn't a panacea, but does have the potential to bring together large numbers of people in a form of civic dialogue. It can also provide immense stores of information for people to access and interact with. Importantly, if universal access is achieved, it allows those with few resources to have equal opportunities for political debate and involvement.

There is scope for an electronic commons to become an integrated and accepted part of the representative process. For local government there is the chance to re-establish communication with their communities, and for parliament, the prize is to engage with a broader cross-section of the population.

This is not just about e-mailing the Prime Minister or watching a video stream of the Budget - this is about creating a new and innovative component for representative governance in the 21st century.

This is an opportunity to realise democracy online, and should be at the heart of the modernising government agenda. This publication calls on the next Government to establish a public service presence on the Internet, to underpin 'democracy online' with infrastructural support, and create a Civic Commons in Cyberspace.

John Fisher
Chief Executive
Citizens Online

Acknowledgements:

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1. Introduction:

There they all are: the forces that shape much of the transmission and reception of politics through the mass media today. A seemingly unbreakable chain links the centrality of the media in modern politics with politicians' adaptations to news imperatives, the emergence of `spin politics', journalists' frequent and aggressive disclosure of such politics, politicians' loss of credibility, and finally public apathy.

In short, communications as presently organised is sucking both the substance and the spirit out of the politics it projects. This is naturally mistrusted and spurned by many of the independent-minded and wary electors who form its intended audience. Yet their chances of enjoying a more nourishing or engaging supply of messages from a public service broadcasting system in crisis, or from a press system embroiled in circulation wars must be rated as no better than slim.

Responses to this state of affairs through media regulation would be inappropriate for a society committed to freedom of expression. Fortunately, opportunities and means to do something about it are emerging amidst the technology-led change of media systems. The Internet injects some new and quite different elements into the relationship between providers and users of information. We are not starry-eyed about the resulting prospects. At best, the new media can be said to have a *vulnerable potential* to improve public communications. If they are to be a force for democracy, a policy intervention is required that is both visionary and practical. The situation calls for deliberate and imaginative institution-building: we should aim to create a `civic commons' in cyberspace.

This proposal is elaborated in section 5 of this booklet. In essence, we recommend the creation of a new organisation, publicly funded but independent from government, to encourage and report upon a wide range of exercises in electronic democracy. Its remit would be `to foster new forms of public involvement in civic affairs through interactive and other appropriate means'. The agency would be charged to elicit, gather, and coordinate citizens' deliberations upon and reactions to

problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies (ranging from local authorities to parliaments and government departments), which would then be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussions.

The resulting `electronic commons' would be neither a talking shop in splendid isolation, nor a replacement of representative by direct democracy. It would be instead an open-ended, institutionally backed extension of people's opportunities to make contributions to public policy on those matters that specially concern them - an extension which could grow in involvement and influence to the degree that those opportunities are taken up and used by all concerned. Ultimately, the electronic commons could become part of the democratic furniture: an integral component of the representative system (the Commons) and an open space for the represented to gather and talk (the civic commons).

Why should such a step be ventured? The case for it does not rest on abstract propositions about an idealised public sphere. Rather it springs from the convergent realities of three main trends, which are demonstrably reshaping the conduct of civic affairs in most advanced democracies at this time.

Firstly, relations between members of the public and holders of political authority are being transformed. On the one side, new expectations and meanings of `citizenship' are being entertained and occasionally acted upon. People often expect to be heard and heeded on more occasions and matters than the ballot boxes of Polling Day can settle. But this process is sporadic and its implications for the system of representative democracy are unclear. On the other hand, government is finding it extremely difficult to respond satisfactorily to the many new needs and problems that are continually being thrown up by the pressures of a rapidly changing society. Top-down ways of coping - through established bureaucratic routines, inter-departmental committees, commissioning opinion surveys, etc. - are simply inadequate. Better ways of tapping people's experiences and felt needs and of feeding them into the

making of laws and policy are required. This part of the analysis is outlined in Section 2.

Secondly, as we noted at the outset, an inexorable impoverishment of mainstream political communication is taking place. On some counts this is now worse than even a minimally adequate democracy deserves. But because much of this trend is rooted in media systems and structures, the ensuing problems of civic communication are inherently difficult to improve or reform from within. This diagnosis is presented in Section 3.

Thirdly, the new interactive media do have a potential to improve public communications and enrich democracy. That potential is vulnerable, however, mainly because an infrastructure for its proper realisation is lacking. With commerce increasingly in the driving seat of Internet development, few of its big players are out to boost citizenship. It is true that various exercises of online consultation, promoting informed deliberation on public policy issues, have been piloted. But lacking constitutional status and effective links to mainstream politics, their contributions have been fragmentary and marginal. Yet with suitable policies and institutional support, some of the emancipatory potential of the new media could be realised. This line of argument is developed in Section 4.

Behind all this there lies yet another fundamental issue and choice. This is a period of definition for the communications industry and its influence on society at large. In a sense, the present moment is analogous to the early days of policy-making for radio. In contrast to the commercial free-for-all that emerged in the United States at the time, Europeans decided that public service broadcasting organisations were essential if the new medium was to serve public purposes at all well. Of course the public service idea is beset these days by daunting challenges and uncertainties. Much of what passes for its reinvention in multichannel conditions is in truth little more than adaptation to the exigencies of technological change, increased competition, cost pressures, shifts in audience tastes, and the attractions

of international markets. A reformulation in terms of fundamental purpose is needed, including that of fashioning a significant public presence on the information highways of the future. Section 5 explains how this could be achieved.

2. Re-casting Citizenship and Democracy:

Much of the talk about democratic change in recent years has been about grand, radical constitutional reforms: a new Parliament for Scotland and Assemblies for Wales and Northern Ireland; Freedom of Information and Human Rights laws; modernisation of the House of Commons. These are formidable changes in democratic governance. But the vigour of democracy does not depend only upon institution-building and constitutional design. Just as important are changes in the contours of political culture, readjusting as they do relationships between governors and the governed.

A conspicuous weakness in twentieth-century representative democracies has been the absence of robust public deliberation. An assumption has prevailed that fair elections plus well-run parliaments equals the democratic ideal, matched all too often by a complementary belief that the public is not very good at or interested in discussing the policies that affect it. Existing practices of representative democracy are ill-suited to active citizens' participation. A reason for this is that political elites have tended to be sceptical about the capacity of the public to absorb, comprehend or intelligently engage with matters of public policy. Leading theorists of representative democracy, such as Lippmann (1922) and Schumpeter (1943), also argued against public involvement in discussion of policy issues.

But in recent years what may be termed `weak representation' has become increasingly obsolete, arising as it did from a political culture of deference when citizens were subjects, political deliberation was best left to the Great and the Good, and representative democracy was largely about collecting votes at election time. Things have changed. New notions of the active citizen, for the first time being taught as part of the school curriculum, envisage participation as a facet of civic duty. New forms of governance are increasingly consultative and alive to experiential evidence. There is a public expectation that communication with those they elect to

manage affairs on their behalf should be more intimate and sharing, less deferential and condescending.

The emergence of a more participatory style of democracy has had three sources.

Firstly, as market forces expanded in the 1980s, within an increasingly privatised economy in which even public services operated on the basis of business models, governments had an interest in relating to the public as customers and consumers. This approach elevated users of public services to the role of cherished customers to whom the state should be responsive. The limitation of this model is that business plans are necessarily shaped more by cost-saving than quality-enhancing proposals.

Secondly, the 1990s witnessed a significant turn in democratic theory away from aggregative notions of preference building (based on the power plays and bargaining of competing interests) towards a more deliberative view of active citizenship. Highly influential writings by Dahl (1989), Habermas (1984) and Rawls (1993) all regarded deliberative opportunities as a precondition of democratic consent and legitimacy. This shift was prompted in part by the end of the Cold War and the need for democracies to assert their values no longer in negative contradistinction to totalitarianism but in more positive normative terms.

Thirdly, from fresh thinking about the nature of democratic authority there has emerged a more central role for citizenship, a hitherto neglected concept in the lexicon of British political culture. As Bernard Crick (2000) explains:

> It was once believed that any specific education for citizenship was not needed - the whole ethos of authority in `a good school' was enough; and if widely practised in the common or maintained schools might even disturb habitual respect for authority. But we will argue that education in citizenship can actually strengthen an authority that is exercised in a democratic context, resting on consent and an informed and reasoned mutual understanding.

On this view, democratic citizenship is antithetical to passive deference and flourishes best in conditions of noisy but civilised discussion.

The last ten years have witnessed a mushrooming of innovations in public participation in governance. These have been particularly prevalent in local government, where there is a legislative requirement for authorities to consult with citizens on matters of `best value'. Local councils are now running regular issues forums, citizens' juries, citizens' panels, and visioning exercises. At a central level, the Government has its 5,000-strong randomly-selected citizens' panel from which views are sought and published regularly on various aspects of policy. The new Scottish Parliament works closely with the Scottish Civic Forum, which comprises a wide variety of civic organisations from throughout Scotland. In the area of science and environmental policy, consensus conferences have been held, in which public deliberation is regarded as a prerequisite for informed agreement on basic priorities of policy. Channel 4's televised deliberative polls, based on Fishkin and Luskin's (1999) concern to `gauge what citizens would think about the issues if they engaged them much more than in their everyday lives - or than in answering ordinary surveys - by learning, thinking and talking more about them', have provided graphic illustrations of how an informed citizenry might behave. It is true that none of these experiments has transformed the fundamentals of representative democracy or dispelled cynicism and apathy (though according to Sargeant and Steele, 1999, there is evidence that citizens who are enabled to participate tend to become more involved in civic affairs afterwards). But they are indicative of a more open, accessible and interactive polity, in which arrogant and exclusive styles of wielding power are becoming anachronistic.

Will the growth of public participation undermine representative democracy? Is government by consultation a slippery slope to rule by endless referenda? We would argue that democratic participation

will serve to strengthen representation by enabling elected representatives to access more readily the vast repertoire of experiences and expertise to be found amongst those they represent. The public does not speak with one voice, so representatives will still have the important job of distinguishing between the messages they receive, as well as between relevant information and mere noise offstage. It is highly unlikely that citizens will ever be able or willing to deliberate and vote upon all the decisions that affect them, both because of the complexity of the issues that need to be addressed and the time required for thorough deliberation. But as participants in discussion of policies that matter to them, members of the public can play an invaluable role, helping to nourish the democratic mandate and to root decision-making in the only legitimacy appropriate to a functioning democracy.

Recent episodes of populist uprisings by sections of the public might seem to undermine the case for a more participatory democracy. The ugly sight of mobs seeking to drive alleged sex offenders from their estates and the amorphous growth of pickets at oil refineries can be seen as crude assertions of `people power' standing in opposition to proper procedures of democratic decision-making. But those protesters were not the products of enhanced public involvement but of a vacuum in deliberative opportunities, which left them feeling isolated and unconsulted about the estates on which they lived or the taxes they paid. The turmoil they unleashed is precisely a result of the failure of public communication, which leaves citizens feeling like onlookers upon an alien process of determining public policy. It is by bringing into the deliberative arena such hitherto excluded sections of the public that democracy can be enhanced rather than disrupted.

But realisation of this rich potential for democratic citizenship depends upon the existence of healthy and robust channels of public communication. Are those now in place up to that challenge?

3. Probing the Problems of Mainstream Political Communication:

Whatever its strengths, it would be difficult to maintain that our political communication system is in great all-round shape at present. Certain democratic values may still be served fairly well by it, such as those of open government, tolerance of disagreement, and the accountability of authority. But others seem to be decidedly short-changed, like opportunities for committed advocacy, rounded dialogue, sustained deliberation, and especially the provision of incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in, rather than merely to follow and kibbitz over, the political process.

Ironically, a polity that is increasingly communications-driven seems to be running on an increasingly degraded fuel supply.

How did it get that way? In thinking about this, it is vital to appreciate how deep and structurally seated the sources of the problems are. They stem not so much from the deficiencies of particular individuals or groups but from the interplay of political institutions, media institutions, and audiences, within a continually evolving technological and socio-political environment. And the failings of present-day political communication are largely traceable to five recent transformations in that environment:

1/ *A dissolution of traditional social ties.*
Institutions that previously organised meaning, identity, and authoritative information for many people, that structured their political preferences and simplified the process of democratic power seeking - notably, political parties, the nuclear family, mainstream religion, the workplace and neighbourhood and social class groupings - have all waned in salience and influence. Party allegiances have consequently weakened, electoral volatility has accelerated, opinion polls swing wildly, and voting has become more an expression of momentary opinion than an act of abiding solidarity.

This explains why the crafting by politicians of messages for electoral attention and support has become a more important, continual and (above all) *professionalised* endeavour. As international scholar David Swanson (2001) puts it:

> To maintain their viability, major parties in many countries have turned to similar strategies involving the use of experts in public relations and marketing, intensive use of the mass media to appeal to voters, sophisticated opinion polling, and foregrounding the appealing personalities of candidates and leaders.

Relations between politicians and journalists have been transformed as a result. Given the fluidity and fickleness of public opinion, news coverage matters enormously to politicians and their advisors. They consider they are engaged in a daily competitive struggle to influence and control popular perceptions of key political events and issues through the major mass media. They aim therefore to permeate and dominate the news agenda so far as possible.

But political journalists have not taken such attempts to narrow and determine their news choices lying down. Wherever possible, they impose their own interpretive frames on politicians' statements and initiatives, limiting the latter to compressed quotes and soundbites. They concentrate on issues that politicians cannot keep under control, ones which reporters can run and break open doors with and apply conventional news values to. They put a spotlight on any weaknesses, failings, and blunders that the professionalised politicians may happen to commit. In particular, they continually `unmask' politicians' publicity efforts, often saying more about the PR motives behind them than about the substantive pro's and con's of their records and proposals.

2/ *The onset of media multiplication.*
A system of media abundance has emerged from proliferation of the main means of communication. Television, once a concentrated communications outlet of only a few channels for politicians to court, has become an extensively elaborated journalistic medium, hosting news flashes and inserts, formed bulletins, diverse public affairs formats, and 24-hour news services. The abundance not only embraces the multiplication of TV channels, radio stations and their delivery platforms. It also includes a proliferation of communications equipment in people's homes - multiple television and radio sets, video recorders, compact disc players, video games, computers, and camcorders.

This changes how politics reaches the public. Much audience reception in the new conditions turns on a tension between a greater freedom to choose, and an increased inability to avoid, political materials. With so many communication channels and forms available, it is easier for people to look for and stay with that which interests them and to turn off whatever does not. Yet because political communication often blends with a flow of other materials nowadays, people can be exposed to it inadvertently as it crops up in genres and formats not usually regarded as `political'.

These conditions have deepened the dependence of politicians on professional assistance. In a more abundant and pervasive communications system, specialists' familiarity with the different news outlets and their (now more differentiated) audiences, an ability to plan campaigns in elaborate detail, and the organisation of prompt responses to daily events, opinion trends recorded by polls and focus groups, the charges of political opponents, and the news frames defined by journalists, have become yet more indispensable.

3/ *Intensified competitive pressures.*
As media abundance advances, politics intended to inform, reveal or persuade must vie for the attention of editors, reporters and audiences in a far more competitive environment. Partly this is because there are so many more outlets through which people can follow politics, none of which can dominate as before. Partly it is because politics must compete with the increased availability in many of those outlets of entertainment, sports and other more beguiling fare. Partly it follows from the exposure of many journalists' media employers

to a market logic, which subjects politics like everything else to the levelling impact of a profit and loss calculus. Even the BBC has stated in a recent paper that its news, current affairs, and political programmes are entering `a period of hyper-competition', in which `a "pick-and-choose" news culture' prevails (BBC News, 1998).

The logic of this is like submitting political communication to the ravages of a shoal of piranha fish. Political journalism loses its formerly sheltered position inside many media organisations. In even the broadsheet press, parliamentary reporting becomes less prominent and rounded. In television, the prime-time schedules of the mass audience channels are cleared for programmes of broader appeal. More weighty current affairs programming is dropped or moved into minority audience slots. Conventional news values, even entertainment values, increasingly rule the political coverage roost, yielding more emphasis on the ups and downs of the political game, politicians' personalities and shortcomings, and novel trivialities (such as Al Gore's lusty embrace of his wife at the most recent Democratic Party convention in the US).

4/ A transformed political agenda.
Meanwhile, the ceaselessly escalating aspirations of a consumerist society - for a better life personally and for improved public services - have generated a remarkably diverse and difficult issue agenda for politicians to address. A heightened awareness has developed of every citizen's entitlement to a decent life in a wide range of spheres - at work, in health, education, social security, public transport, the environment, etc. Yet a host of problems have arisen in all these areas, which are not amenable to quick solution, and which, at best, governments can only hope to ameliorate gradually over the longer term. Politicians are also expected to come up with answers to such near-intractable problems as rising rates of crime, drug abuse, adolescent misbehaviour, and other indicators of social breakdown. Even the more private domains of life - e.g., sex, gender and family relations - have been politicised.

In short, the political agenda spans a broader range of

more complex problems than ever before.

5/ Reduced respect for elites.
 At the same time, public attitudes have shifted towards authority holders, leaders and specialist experts in many walks of life. Automatic deference has evaporated, and an air of scepticism, sometimes healthy, sometimes cynical, prevails over their credentials, claims and credibility. In a more individualistic and consumer-oriented society, higher standards of service are expected in all areas of provision, and `the people in charge' are judged more by their delivery of tangible results than by their status.

In response, a veritable maelstrom of populist currents has coursed through the worlds of politics and the media, some welcome but others troubling. Parties and media alike regularly conduct research into ordinary people's preferences, tastes, and images of their own efforts and personalities - to help keep in touch with the public mood and to stand a better chance of winning electoral support or audience share respectively. Anything that smacks of paternalistic discourse is `out'. News organisations put more stress on the accessibility of the language in which their reports are written, on covering issues that matter most to people, and on making plain the relevance of political events to people's lives - personalising stories where possible, for example. In broadcasting, the voiced opinions of men and women in the street are being tapped more often in an explosion of populist formats - talk shows, phone-ins, solicitation of calls, faxes and e-mails for response by interviewed politicians, studio panels confronting party representatives, etc., etc. Much of this is refreshing and constructive, but as we have seen in recent months, organisers of protests and demonstrations that seem to enjoy passionate support can now wield enormous media and political clout. Single-minded, ignoring complexities, and heedless of alternative values and priorities, this variant of populism has erupted like a wild card in the system.

Increasingly shaped by all these pressures, the mainstream political communication process now strains

more against than with the grain of citizenship. And because they are institutionally rooted, the resulting problems are inherently difficult to resist or to reform from within. They may be summarised as follows:

1/ For civic purposes, the most significant trends are running the wrong way.
Thus, in democracies where measures across a series of recent election campaigns are available, the balance of the evidence shows that media coverage of politics is diminishing in amount and becoming more `mediated' (dominated more by journalists and their frames of reference), more focused on power tactics at the expense of issue substance, and more negative. Although public broadcasters in some European countries have succumbed less than commercial telecasters to these tendencies, their ability to continue to do so in increasingly competitive conditions must be in serious doubt.

2/ Much of the present system pivots on a mutually counter-productive relationship between its key elements - journalists and leading politicians.
Whereas journalists continually face orchestrated attempts to set their agendas, politicians' initiatives are continually `deconstructed' for their `base strategic significance' (as Scammell, 2000, has put it). Striking details appear in a recently published analysis of the political coverage by eight quality newspapers of Britain's national press during six months preceding and including the 1997 General Election campaign. The study found 444 articles (many of them critical) about `spin doctoring' by the major parties, amounting to an average of 17 such pieces per week (Esser, Reinemann and Fan, 2000). Of course this drumbeat has been amplified still further since Labour's election victory.

Such a communications road is especially bumpy for governments with ambitious policy projects in train. Their efforts, targets, spending plans, and proclaimed achievements are continually portrayed as publicity stunts. But all this can be confusing for citizens as well - left uncertain how much of the communications coming their way should be taken as `for real', how much as

the smoke and mirrors of political spin, and how much as the sensationalism and cynicism of journalistic spin.

3/ Less and less of the political communications diet serves the citizen role.
The glacial pace of approaches to solution of the country's problems conflicts sharply with the transitory pace of news. The complexity of many of today's political problems conflicts sharply with the simplifications required for sound bites, bold headlines and populist appeal. Coverage of policy issues is often overwhelmed by presentation of political conflict as a game of posturing, campaign ploys and manoeuvres. And because the publicity system tempts leaders to make strong claims in striking and unqualified terms, big gaps may emerge between people's expectations and their experience of results on the ground. Such a process exudes an over-supply of oxygen for cynicism. As McQuail (1995) concludes:

> By concentrating on scandal, venality, and wrong-doing, the media do little to enrich the public dis course. They work against a mature political culture, which requires information, engagement, and some measure of trust and altruism.

4/ In response to many of the developments outlined above - the fragmentation of social orders; breakdown of party loyalties; increased electoral volatility, independent-mindedness and scepticism; and the increased intractability of the central problems of politics *- the political communication scene has become more turbulent and less manageably containable than before.*
Both politicians and political journalists face increased competition for access to publics and audiences - the former from a wider range of cause and interest groups clamouring for publicity, the latter from many new makers of news, sources of commentary, and investigative purveyors of scandal in talk shows, tabloids and Internet web sites. Traditional ethical constraints are fraying on both sides of the political communication divide as well - with politicians less inhibited about mounting negative attacks on each other and journalists less wedded to past proprieties of their trade. And in conditions of

communication abundance, the structure and role of the audience is changing, whose members are more difficult for communicators to `read' and pin down.

Admittedly, there may be more chances in such a system for more voices to be heard, more problems to be brought to people's attention, and more chances for people to find what they want to hear, see or know about. But it may also be more difficult to put all this together `at the centre'. Such communication flows could be conducive more to a public sphere of cacophony than to one of coherence.

4. The Civic Potential of the New Media:

So could the new media be at all redemptive in these conditions?

Any answer to this question must be cautious. Their dissemination is unlikely to replace the old communication system by a new one, overturn existing power structures, or reverse the zeitgeists that have accompanied recent social, political and cultural changes. With the rise of cable television in the 1970s, a number of media commentators, particularly in the United States, supposed that a new age of interactive communication was dawning, in which communities would be reinvigorated and democratic habits nurtured. In retrospect, such optimism was naive: the transformative potential of cable broadcasting failed precisely because the cable industry was forced to compete in a fierce market where revenues from ratings and advertising mattered more than civic contributions.

The answer must also be realistic. As communication options multiply offline and online, and reception of news and public affairs fragments, a greater gap may open between people with motivated access to ample stores of political materials and those with only sporadic exposure to sketchy and tabloid versions of politics. And of course tuning in to civic affairs is just one of the many uses to which the new media can be put. In fact, a US study of the gratifications associated with Internet use has disclosed a profile more like that for viewing prime-time entertainment television than for reading newspapers or watching the news (Althaus and Tewkesbury, 2000).

The answer certainly cannot be deterministic. The Internet, for example, is a complex proposition, whose future will be shaped by a multiplicity of forces. Most news organisations are moving online with reworked services. US political parties and candidates are exploring a widening range of Internet applications that may eventually enter UK politics - to present their policies without journalistic interpretation; to raise funds;

to mobilise supporters and get out the vote; to send personally targeted messages to voters with known demographic or opinion profiles; and to bombard journalists with electronic `press releases'. The electronic delivery of government services is proceeding along ambitious lines with plans in both this country and the United States to create a single Internet gateway for all the needs that citizens may have to contact public agencies. In addition, the Internet has amplified the voice and extended the reach of single-issue politics and, in a sort of electronic Hyde Park, given megaphones to an assortment of relative newcomers to political communication. These include amateur journalists, advocates of unorthodox opinions, and civic groups offering information, guidance and comment (supportive, neutral and lampooning) on political personalities and causes. A multitude of informally organised discussion forums, to which anyone interested in the issue or topic concerned may contribute, has also mushroomed on the Internet through Usenet groups and other bulletin boards.

What all this may eventually add up to is unclear. But the gist of our own answer to the question posed above has four parts:

1/ The Internet does have a potential to revitalise our flagging political communication arrangements.
2/ There have been a number of interesting attempts to realise that potential.
3/ The record of those efforts discloses a mixture of upsides and downsides.
4/ An exercise of institutional invention is required to prevent the emancipatory potential of the new media from being submerged, sidelined or marginalised.

The Elements of Potential

First of all, unlike broadcasting, which has provoked long-running debates about how far, when, and over what programmes its audiences may be regarded as `active' or `passive' (cf. Katz, 1996 vs. Kubey, 1996), the Internet is unquestionably a medium of

predominantly active users. Typically, one decides which web site to visit and then, through a sequence of follow-up decisions, one may click on other pages or pursue other links of interest, ponder the material received and possibly even talk about it with others. Admittedly, the extent and depth of such activity should not be exaggerated or idealised. Empirical studies of web site usage report far more exposure to main than subsequent pages (Dutton, Elberse and Hale, 1999). But if the Internet tends to encourage a more active disposition to communications than the mainstream media, then some of this should transfer over to people's reception through it of news, public affairs and politics.

Secondly, the Internet's discursive role could also diverge from that of older media. Unlike broadcasting, which works within tight time limits and essentially *shows* its audiences *other* people discussing political issues, over the Internet it is possible to involve large numbers of users themselves in a more full expression and exchange of experiences and opinions on a given topic. It can be a medium for engaging more widely in, and not just presenting and following, civic dialogue.

Three other distinctive features of the Internet are also relevant. One is its provision of large stores of retrievable data that may be tapped into by users, at various levels and depths, in line with their particular informational needs. Another is the Internet's mechanisms for interactive exchange, enabling `a greater symmetry of communicative power than [the] one-way communication' flows of the press and broadcasting (Schultz, 2000).

Finally, by making it easier for individuals to find and follow what concerns them personally, and by lowering the cost of obtaining information, the influence of social status on political involvement may be reduced. Citizens and groups with few resources can undertake acts of communication and monitoring that previously were the domain mainly of resource-rich organisations and individuals (Bimber, 2000).

Attempts to Activate the Potential

But so far the Internet's civic potential has been greater than its use. Although a number of innovative initiatives have been undertaken and pursued, there has not yet been an explosion of public dialogues using ICTs.

The earliest attempts to engage citizens online were made by enthusiastic, civic-minded citizens. In Minnesota the MN-Politics email forum began life in 1995, initiated by Steven Clift. UK Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD) was founded in London by people who had observed the Minnesota experiment from a distance. Both of these served as purely discursive fora, with no formal links to governmental structures - although in 1997, shortly before its demise, UKCOD was contracted by the UK Government to run an online public consultation in response to its proposal for Freedom of Information legislation, and MN-Politics went on to have a significant effect upon state politics, including the online campaign methods of its populist Governor, Jesse Ventura.

The first state-driven online consultations were run by local authorities. This experience was consistent with the pattern of most online networking which has primarily been community-focused. Although such consultations have been organised widely in Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK, they offer limited opportunities for citizens to engage with that process of more significant policy formation which takes place at a national (or broader) level.

At national level, there have been some consultations run by governments over the Internet, mainly on issues of particular concern to IT-users. In November 1998 the Danish Board of Technology ran a successful tele-consultation in which citizens were invited to propose initiatives for IT policies which were later considered and prioritised by a citizens' jury. Similarly, the French National Assembly's public web-discussion on its IT policy and the UK Parliament's online citizens' consultations on the Data Protection Bill (1998) and e-democracy (1999) were directed at connected citizens

who were most likely to be sufficiently motivated to participate. A Finnish experiment in online consultative referenda is based on text messages sent by mobile phones. The Hansard Society in this country has set up online consultations in which groups of citizens with appropriate experience or expertise advise and inform parliamentarians who are examining specific areas of policy or legislation. These have involved not just highly-connected groups, such as scientists and engineers (for a House of Lords enquiry) or lawyers' and tenants' groups (to be consulted on the Leasehold Reform Bill), but women survivors of domestic violence who have participated in the first ever parliamentary enquiry to take evidence from such witnesses in their homes and refuges. Another networking project, linking local community groups and the Scottish Parliament, was launched in January 2000. BT Scotland has invested £280,000 to place computers in community centres and village halls across Scotland, providing training and support in Internet use and running a series of online events to link communities with the Parliament.

The Record Assessed

The experimentation thus far has been fragmented and disparate. It highlights a mixed record of positive advances and significant limitations.

On the one hand, we can identify seven benefits that emerge from the experience to date of online civic engagement:

1/ *Transcending time.* Participants can discuss over a period of hours, days, weeks or months in an asynchronous fashion. This allows time for reflective debate and the space to develop evidence and argumentation. Compare this with a three-hour meeting or a two-day consultation conference, in which each witness is allocated a limited slot in which to have his or her say.

2/ *Transcending place.* Participation can be open to all, regardless of geographical spread. Thus, communities of interest and passion can form locally, regionally, nationally and globally, with participants in (say)

Scotland and Nova Scotia able to enter without cost disadvantage to either.

3/ *Making connections.* Connections have been made between groups online that would probably not have happened otherwise. For example, the survivors of domestic violence who were able to give evidence to MPs in a secure environment; citizens sending messages direct to councillors or the Number Ten Downing Street web forum; people in Minnesota influencing their election agenda via Minnesota e-politics. Politicians, who might not otherwise interact directly with citizens very often, find themselves in a position of unusual political intimacy with people who had traditionally formed part of their passive audiences.

4/ *Language of the people.* As in the case of many phone-ins, online discussion tends to be closer to the language of ordinary people. Although agendas are often formed by elites who set up web sites, communities and individual citizens push agendas into new directions. This has been the experience of BBC Online's *The Great Debate*, where online producers set discussion topics, but new topics are raised by participants who discuss them in a style of their own.

5/ *Community building.* Online civic engagement might begin by being narrowly focused on a local issue, but tends often to develop into a broader network, involving both online and offline connections between a range of people who would not have otherwise met and discovered what they shared.

6/ *Recruitment of experience and expertise.* It is possible to recruit people to online discussions whose specific experiences and expertise can inform policy discussions. Examples from the Hansard Society's consultations include women scientists, survivors of domestic violence, and e-democracy activists. In the case of disadvantaged or marginalised groups, this can help to make policy formation more inclusive and reflective of real problems (see Coleman and Normann, 2000).

7/ *Learning to deliberate.* Participants in online discussion can encounter new ideas and sources of information and new ways of thinking about issues.

On the other hand, we can also identify five main downsides to online civic engagement:

1/ *Risks of political control.* Online communication offers political leaders the enticing prospect of `disintermediation', i.e. addressing target audiences without the critical intervention of the media. But most information (and all politically valuable information) is far from being raw and objective. The interpretive role of public-service media, as well as their professional role as non-partisan regulators of communication, is often needed to ensure that public discussion is not controlled by the very political elites (be they politicians or bureaucrats) which produce much public information and may wish to influence the agenda for and direction of public debate.

2/ *Vague objectives.* The powers and limits of the public need to be made clear at the outset of consultations. Excessive expectations can lead to public disappointment and a sense of being hoaxed by new media gimmickry. In short, there must be an explicit relationship between public engagement and policy outcome. Democracy is not just deliberative chat; deliberative input must bear some relationship to decisions actually made.

3/ *Bogus democracy.* But neither should online engagement be wasted on technopopulist claims to empower citizens through a spurious direct democracy. Online plebiscites, such as Vote.com and Vote.co.uk, promise participants a degree of political influence that is not real; they are based upon a notion of democracy which emphasises simple head counting at the expense of mature deliberation; they fail to meet (or even recognise) representative criteria; and, far from empowering citizens, the votes of participants are often handed over to politicians in order to provide them with unauthorised profiles of those they represent.

4/ *Lack of informed inputs.* Some online discussions address policy areas that are broad and complex, without supporting the process with key documentation and expert participants. Lacking adequate intellectual procedures, these discussions either drift off into pointless exchanges of prejudice or else arrive at such generalised conclusions that they offer little or no help in formulating policy. The political process is complex; it involves resource implications, trade-offs, long-term as well as short-term consequences and positions of principle. The purpose of online consultation should not

be to seek `obvious' answers or simplistic consensus, but to involve public experience, expertise and wisdom in the process of devising better policy.

5/ *The risk of fragmentary marginalisation.* The experimentation thus far has been fragmented, small-scale and of disparate value. Examples of successful practice are still limited to relatively small numbers within a few countries. No structure exists to facilitate learning and exchange across the different efforts; to maintain continuity of activity; to identify and institutionalise best practice; and to create a more substantial and valued space for civic deliberation.

5.   A Civic Commons in Cyberspace:

An Overview of the Idea

Our proposal for a civic commons in cyberspace aims to create an enduring structure which could realise more fully the democratic potential of the new interactive media. This would involve the establishment of an entirely new kind of public agency, designed to forge fresh links between communication and politics and to connect the voice of the people more meaningfully to the daily activities of democratic institutions. The organisation would be publicly funded but be independent from government. It would be responsible for eliciting, gathering, and coordinating citizens' deliberations upon and reactions to problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies (ranging from local councils to parliaments and government departments), which would then be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussion. This should encourage politicians and officials to view the stimulation of increased participation not as mere `citizens' playgrounds' but as forums in which they must play a serious part.

The organisation would not (indeed, could not) supplant the many initiatives that have burgeoned in recent years to promote public deliberation and consultation over civic issues. But it could bring many of those efforts under a more capacious electronic roof, backing them up with substantial production resources and expertise, and enhancing their visibility, status and clout. Its role would be both responsive to ideas for such ventures put to it by others - and proactive - in proposing initiatives that its staff might regard as opportune. And it would have a particular interest in exploring new ways of consulting intelligently with the broadest possible range of citizens, often including for the first time in public debate groups that have been marginalised for reasons of lifestyle, economic circumstance, language or disability.

Core watchwords of the agency's work must include `transparency' and `accountability', and it should be answerable to an extensive range of stakeholders,

including communities (local and of interest), local authorities, public-service broadcasters, organisations promoting citizenship and democracy, as well as the parliaments and assemblies of the UK. Keeping bureaucratic procedure to a minimum, the staffing and activities of such a body should combine the virtues of amateurism - creativity, enthusiasm, commitment and idealism - with those of professionalism - especially thoroughness of pre-planning, organisation, carry-through and after-the-fact evaluation. Overall, its brief should be regarded as exploratory and developmental, and its activities should be conceived as a cumulative civic learning exercise, assessed in such terms in its periodic reports.

The Functions of the Agency

The proposed organisation would be charged with promoting, publicising, regulating, moderating, summarising, and evaluating the broadest and most inclusive range of online deliberation via various new media platforms, including the web, e-mail, newsgroups, and digital TV.

Promotion
Issues of access for all and accessibility of public information are central to the success of any authentic e-democracy project. Achieving both of these goals involves hard work. The agency would need to promote opportunities for inclusive access to the electronic commons by seeking imaginative ways to make communication resources available to the public in such places as libraries, schools, doctors' surgeries, community centres and municipal offices. The holyrood.com project of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Services, which has provided access to computers in 200 rural Scottish communities, is an example of how an energetic body can provide connectivity for citizens who might otherwise have been excluded from the political arena. Such an agency might well work with business (supermarkets, banks, post offices) to open up kiosks giving public access to the electronic civic commons. Alongside the crucial

democratic issue of equal access, the agency would need to work on ways of promoting accessible online content so that the current tendency of the web to be primarily textual, monolingual and made in America can be redressed. If the new media are to serve democracy, the design and language of their content has to establish and then take account of user needs.

Publicising
The Internet is littered with dead web sites which few people, if anyone apart from their creators, have ever visited. The freedom for anyone to set up shop within the world wide web has given a degree of libertarian romance to the new media age, and there are some forms of interaction which benefit greatly from this. But democracy requires a trusted civic space to which all know that they can come when they have something to discuss with their fellow citizens and elected representatives. The agency would seek to establish trust in such spaces, locally, regionally, nationally - and perhaps at European or even global levels. It would support gateways to worthwhile discussions and consultations and offer easily accessible archives of previous public deliberations. Just as local authorities devote resources to voter education, the agency would seek to make citizens aware of their civic rights and opportunities in the deliberative arena.

Regulation
The principle of free speech is central to democracy. But so is civil behaviour. The agency would endeavour to address the sensitive balance between individual rights to be heard and the collective need for civilised conduct in public spaces. Recognition of such a need emerged strongly from Dutton's (1996) survey of Californian members of two computer-based discussion groups, many of whom expressed concern over the dogmatic and discourteous contributions of other participants. As he concluded, `Developing sound and fair rules for public electronic fora appears vital to realizing their potential.' The agency, then, would set out best practices for public deliberation, ranging from basic rules of engagement to proven ways of arguing a case without giving offence. Free speech without regulation becomes just noise;

democracy without procedure would be in danger of degenerating into a tyranny of the loudest shouter - or, in the case of e-democracy, the most obsessive, loquacious message posters. Civilising public deliberation through considered regulation is no less necessary to a robust democracy than has been the long evolution of parliamentary procedure and rule-making (currently being modernised).

Moderation

For online discourse to work well sensitive skills of moderation are needed. Where can one learn such skills? It is a reflection of the decline of public discussion in the UK that there are few contemporary settings in which people can acquire those skills that used to be called `chairmanship'. In the United States courses for online facilitators are now emerging, and in the UK there are discussion guides for those who moderate online communities. These skills need to be pulled together, defined and disseminated. The agency could offer training in moderation techniques, including means of facilitating discussions in ways that enable the voices to be heard of citizens who do not necessarily feel bold, articulate or firmly committed to a particular point of view.

Summarising

Allowing everyone a chance to have their say is only one part of the democratic project. Effective representation requires accountability. An important role of the agency would be to secure the provision of useful summaries of public discussions and consultations so that these may be fed in at appropriate levels to institutions of democratic representation. For example, a local authority seeking public views on transport policy options would gain less from an account of each citizen's contribution than a broad (though not simplified) picture of the overall threads in the discussion and people's responses to them. This is where the strict independence and impartiality of the proposed agency is of utmost importance: the responsibility of providing balanced and trusted accounts of public deliberation is crucial if there is to be confidence in the electronic civic commons both by citizens and representatives.

Evaluation

Political scientists spend a great deal of time and money analyzing how people vote. We also need to look at how they discuss, for `it is in...ordinary conversation about politics...that...democratic culture receives its most concrete realization' (Wyatt, Katz and Kim, 2000). The agency could be responsible for commissioning evaluative research that would cast light on the process of online public deliberation. Of course, they would not be called upon to re-invent the wheel - the literatures on political participation generally and online activity specifically do include some material on how ordinary people think about and discuss issues that matter to them. The value that an agency might bring to this would be cross-disciplinary research in which analysis could be combined with practical involvement in setting up and improving projects.

None of the above is intended to suggest that everything about the scope and future activities of an electronic commons should be prescribed from the outset. Like the notion of public service broadcasting in the 1920s, the principle of a civic commons in cyberspace needs first to be accepted and institutionally armed with sufficient powers, freedom and resources to find its feet practically.

An interesting issue, among many that could arise for further consideration, concerns the territorial boundaries of the `civic commons'. In an increasingly interdependent world, we have become `citizens' of a series of overlapping authorities into each of which more deliberative public input would be desirable. These range from local authorities to Greater London, regional assemblies, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and even the United Nations. An electronic commons for the UK only would be simpler to arrange but, given the global reach of the Internet, would also be anachronistic. A national solution might be most convenient in the first instance, so long as it remains open to cooperation and linkages with corresponding projects in other countries and transnational organisations.

Is This All Too Much?

But why should we go this far? Why not just continue to let electronic democracy initiatives bubble up here and there on an ad hoc basis? Several reasons for trying to carve out a more ambitiously conceived and authoritatively grounded `civic commons' impress us as crucial.

Learning from the past
We have already alluded to the high hopes that surrounded the emergence of cable TV. Similar expectations were voiced in the UK in the early days of local radio. We do not want to see such hopes dissipated again. The lesson to be derived from the failure of cable-based civic networks is that they lacked constitutional status and had ill-defined links to the political process. If they are to be sustained, developments in online democratic communication will require the aegis of a legitimate authority. In an age of media superabundance, trusted civic space needs to be marked out, protected and promoted.

Serving public interests
In addition to all the absorbing functions of entertainment, commerce, advertising and chatty sociability to which the new interactive media are naturally applied, tangible form needs to be given to the principle that there are public interests in the field of information and communication which must be provided for. In this sense, we see the new media as being no different from broadcasting, where service providers have traditionally been expected to adhere to certain basic standards of information provision. There is a unique requirement in a democracy, not only for certain information to be universally available, but also for certain channels of communication to be commonly accessible. Without this, the common knowledge and values by which democratic societies cohere would atrophy, resulting in a fragmented and enervated version of citizenship. As Tambini (2000) rightly argues, 'e-democracy without universal internet access, is equivalent to elections without universal suffrage'.

Civilising cyberspace
Safeguards are needed against the exploitation of interactive media for ulterior purposes, such as commercial gain, plebiscitary support, populist agitation, administrative convenience or cosmetic PR exercises. In short, there exist a multitude of ways in which governments, lobbyists, pressure groups, businesses or others could appear to be promoting electronic democracy when their real goal is to advance their own political, financial or publicity interests. We are far from proposing that such activities should be prevented or censored in any way (even if they could be), but we do favour making clear distinctions between opportunities to enhance civic democracy and distractions from that purpose. In order for citizens to trust the integrity of the electronic civic commons and to use it as a portal to local as well as national and wider fora for debate, there needs to be an accountable body which can illuminate best practices and report critically on those exercises less worthy of public trust.

Stronger representation
There is scope for the electronic commons to become an integral and accepted part of the representative process. Local councils, which have been weakened in terms of both powers and legitimacy in recent decades, could use their local commons to re-establish direct communication with their communities. Parliament, which has been undergoing a crisis of legitimacy and confidence about its role, is an ideal institution to take advantage of the electronic commons. MPs could establish regular consultations with their constituents and with communities within their constituencies. Parliamentary select committees, which take evidence from expert witnesses, could extend their reach by taking regular evidence from citizens with fresh and diverse experiences and expertise. Pre-legislative scrutiny of draft bills could be opened up to the public, either in general or via recruited groups with special knowledge. The Commons Modernisation Committee has floated the idea of post-legislative scrutiny. Who better to contribute to a parliamentary evaluation of the implementation and effects of new laws and policies than members of the public themselves?

But for the public to have confidence in such a process there must be authentic participation by representatives. The last thing that we need in an age of spin and posture is a token channel in which politicians appear to be engaging with citizens, like the White House web site where visitors are invited to write to the President with their views. Cosmetic interactivity would be worse than none.

Here are some further examples of creative ways that we would like to see online consultations promoted:

• Each year the Chancellor of the Exchequer produces a pre-budget consultation paper which is read and responded to by a relatively narrow range of people in the City. It would be useful to open up this process of consultation, utilising digital TV perhaps to invite the public to respond to policy options and discuss ways that their localities or professions would be affected by particular decisions.

• The government has established inter-departmental teams to improve the development and application of policy in a number of fields. An example is its Better Government for Older People scheme, which was established in awareness of the need to coordinate responses to the diverse problems that can arise in an aging society. But if the aim is to find ways of treating the elderly as individuals, and not just as more demands on the NHS, then mechanisms for tapping their own experiences, perceptions and statements of need are vital.

• Local government reform requires councils to consult regularly with citizens on plans for their communities. Public kiosks could be established in key locations, with prizes offered by local businesses as a reward for coming online.

• Parliamentary select committee inquiries could webcast witness hearings and invite groups with relevant experience and expertise to discuss, comment upon and supplement evidence presented.

• European Union institutions are often out of touch and lacking in public interest. And yet these institutions have a huge effect upon people's lives. Policy consultations could be set up, in which citizens are invited to consider issues current before MEPs or the Council of Ministers and to see whether there is a public input on such issues which coincides or conflicts with institutional policy-making.

• Deliberative polls (i.e. not `snapshot polls') have proved an intriguing method of assessing how views are formed and can change after exposure to relevant information and expert analysis. An online deliberative poll on an issue of national importance, such as the euro or electoral reform, could have significant prescriptive force, as well as providing an archived resource for those subsequently wanting to explore the issues involved.

A national conversation
The case for an electronic commons turns largely on how far one agrees with Philip Gould's (2000) declaration that `You cannot run things unless you are involved in a dialogue…Democracy must become a continuing conversation, not just an occasional interview.' We are of the view that democracy is not and should no longer be perceived as a spectator sport. In a democracy all voices need to be heard, even if it is impossible to hear them all together.

There are two conceptions of citizenship at stake here. The first is inert and sulky in character, precariously balanced between an under-informed confusion about political affairs and an ill-informed certainty that government is inherently corrupt and democracy futile. The second conception envisages the active citizen, enabled by effective, accessible technologies as well as effective, accessible representative institutions, to feel democratically empowered beyond their few seconds in the polling booth. In the first view of citizenship the role of the media is to offer as quickly as possible what information will be swallowed by the semi-disaffected plus distractions from political information to those who

couldn't care less. But in the second view the media become a locus for participation and a facilitator of a national conversation in which the represented learn to present themselves to one another and to their elected representatives.

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Notes

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His publications include:

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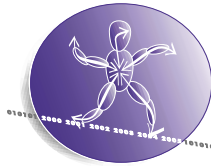*Electronic Media, Parliament & The Public: Making Democracy Visible* (Hansard, 1999),
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C i t i z e n s O n l i n e

Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace