



SOMETHING TO DO: Promising Practices for Participation and Public Engagement Online

A CAPE working paper on digital engagement

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Summer 2008

At this point, it's hard to argue with the principle that the Internet can draw people together. In fact, it's one of the most powerful organizing tools in history. In addition, new media has become an amazingly creative force in society. Anyone can be a publisher, anyone can be a movie producer (although actually finding an audience for your work is another matter). The impact on politics has been enormous, and yet limited.

At its best, the Internet supercharges political campaigning. The 2008 campaign has already proven how well online efforts complement the traditional goals of a political campaign: getting the word out, fundraising and organizing supporters to actually show up at the polls. The campaigns of Barack Obama and Ron Paul, in particular, made effective use of this new ways to mobilize the "netroots." Obama's online efforts have generally been seen as critical to his winning the Democratic nomination, while Paul's devoted online followers gave his views a visibility and impact they would have lacked in a traditional campaign.¹²

The changes run both ways, as candidates are beginning to see their supporters as more than donors and free labor.³ When anyone can make his own video "ad" in favor of a candidate, that spreads the candidate's message much more quickly – but also means that some candidates may have to deal with "proxy" messages that they never would have said themselves.

The candidates' own social networking tools can also be used to hold them accountable. The fact that the "My Barack Obama" site is being used by tens of thousands of backers to criticize Obama's position on federal wiretapping laws is something unique in politics.^{4, 5} The Internet's ability to allow supporters to actually have give-and-take with their candidate, instead of one-way "messaging," could be a fundamental change in how partisans interact with politicians.

But the key word there is "partisan." Realistically, the only people on the My Barack Obama site are his supporters, and that's true of almost all political sites. For many people in politics, that's enough. If you envision governing as an extension of campaigning, as a continual battle between interest groups to control and direct the government, then the Internet just makes that system more efficient. In fact, it fits in beautifully. If civic society itself is only a battlefield where partisans fight it out, then the state of Internet dialogue we have is good enough.

¹ "Obama draws on social network of support," International Herald Tribune, July 9, 2008
<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/07/06/business/hughes07.php>

² Kirkpatrick, David, "Guy Fawks Day Helps Raise Millions for Paul," The Caucus blog, The New York Times, Nov. 7, 2007,
<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/05/paul-supporters-raise-27-in-a-day>

³ Sifrey, Micah, "Justine Lam on Ron Paul's Networked Campaign," March 3, 2008, Personal Democracy Forum blog,
http://www.personaldemocracy.com/blog/entry/1803/justine_lam_on_ron_paul_s_networked_campaign

⁴ McCormick, John, "Obama's Online Muscles Flex Against Him," Chicago Tribune, July 8, 2008
http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-obama-internet_wedjul09,0,1582289.story

⁵ Vargas, Jose Antonio, "Obama Responds to Online FISA Critics," The Washington Post, June 3, 2008,
http://blog.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/07/03/obama_responds_to_online_fisa.html?

For those who believe in public engagement, governing ought to be something different. The public shouldn't just be an audience to politics, or potential "customers" to government. In public engagement, the public is a resource to be enlisted in the problem-solving process. Given the right conditions, the public's ability to learn, to get involved and to make decisions is far greater than most realize. Regular citizens, who may not be intensely interested in traditional politics but who are greatly interested in the government choices that affect their lives, can make a major contribution in shaping policy. And everybody should be there, whether they're activists or not, whether they're liberal or conservative, rich or poor...you get the idea.

From a public engagement standpoint, this is one of the most frustrating and troubling developments about the Internet. The rhetoric, and indeed the intentions, of everyone in the digital democracy movement lines up perfectly with public engagement. Everyone agrees the potential is there. But so far, the Internet is primarily enabling people in partisan silos to network within their own group.

The great challenge of the Internet remains one of building means where dialogue between different people and deliberation on ideas can happen. This may seem like an odd statement to many people working in digital media, because community building has always been seen as one of the medium's great strengths. Yet the virtual communities that have formed naturally haven't met the test of true public engagement any better than real-world communities.

From the Internet's earliest days as a truly public medium in the early 1990s, Usenet and pioneering communities like The Well showed how robust (if unruly) self-governing online forums could be. The early challenge was to find way of keeping the medium's essential anonymity from spawning bad behavior, like spamming and flaming, or at least keeping that antisocial behavior from driving out real discussion. Usenet never solved this problem and consequently has become a marginal section of the Internet. Others have been more successful. Slashdot created a thriving technology community by allowing users to rate the comments of others, letting the group collectively reward constructive behavior and sanction misconduct. Ebay uses a similar concept to allow hundreds of thousands of anonymous buyers and sellers to create a trustworthy market.

But all of these successful sites have one thing in common: they are all communities of affinity; gatherings of like-minded people. That's been true even from the beginning (it's no coincidence that The Well eventually became part of the liberal e-zine Salon). The Internet is a powerful tool for bringing together people with similar interests – or similar opinions. Only technologists use Slashdot. Only conservatives post at Free Republic. And the power to police bad behavior that these sites provide can easily become a way to enforce conformity in opinion (To prove that point, try posting a liberal comment in a conservative blog sometime, or vice versa).

There have been promising experiments with bringing together those with different views. People have been brought together in Internet forums to discuss a specific topic or task. But these experiments never seem to occur naturally, in the way that communities of affinity develop spontaneously. So far, reaching out to disparate groups online requires great effort, commitment and funding. In addition to the costs of suitable technology, these experiments always seem to require careful planning and consistent moderation.

It's true that "real-world" or "face-to-face" public engagement always requires effort in the beginning. The preparation of materials and training of moderators is vital. Yet we have found the participants often keep the process going after Public Agenda has left. So far, none of the experiments in digital engagement have become self-sustaining in the same way. There is still much work to be done in this field – both to create the incentive for disparate communities to develop naturally and to help them become self-sustaining.

The online political community developed around the principles of public engagement hasn't been built yet. But perhaps there are pieces of the puzzle out there. Some of the experiments out there show what might be done, and suggest core principles for what, eventually, we're confident *will* be done. We can

glimpse what best practices are for such a community, a few basic rules for tying together the worlds of online community, user-generated content, and public engagement to truly empower citizens. For a start:

Provide a Tangible Task: SourceWatch

First-generation Internet discussion was just that: discussion. A few years ago, this was the most dazzling part of the online world, the simple ability for people to link up and talk based on whatever interests they might have, no matter how arcane. This was often tagged as “community building,” and certainly the online world is full of communities around a common interest. There are communities devoted to cancer survivors, reality television shows, ferret owners, men’s shaving, and just about anything else you care to name. The participants in these forums gain a real sense of belonging and are often able to provide the same sort of support one would see in real-world support groups or clubs.

One of the most interesting developments in online community, however, has been the shift from mere discussion to actual collaboration. The most significant expression of this by far is the “open source” software movement. Open source has a radically different, grassroots approach than mainstream software companies like Microsoft. Under open source rules, a software program becomes a collaborative effort, often including thousands or tens of thousands of volunteer developers working to improve the product. The end result is constantly updated and always available for free.

Often, there’s a progenitor-guru-innovator behind the original program (such as Linus Torvald for the popular Linux operating system) who chooses to throw his creation open to the world. Copyright is handled by a “general public license” that allows anyone to modify the code, so long as they credit the inventor. In some cases, such as the Firefox Web browser, there is a nonprofit organization that serves as the coordinator and manager of the effort. In others, a looser web community reviews and rates advancements. But the most interesting thing about open source, from a deliberative democracy point of view, is that it actually has an end product: a functional, free software application. It is not, as critics of both deliberative democracy and online communities point out, “just talk.”

Software, of course, is a tangible product. It either works well or it doesn’t. If the Firefox browser doesn’t work well, people will stop using it. Whether something “works” or not in politics is another matter, and not always as clear cut. But even fairly philosophical goals can have tangible elements – and that’s where online collaboration can be helpful.

Take “transparency,” for example, one of the most talked about ideas in political reform. The ability for citizens to see what the government is doing, and who is attempting to shape politics, underlies much of the debate over campaign finance and lobbying reform. Some of the most popular and award-winning Web sites on politics, like OpenSecrets.org, are devoted to making campaign finance information more easily available and searchable for the public.

Other sites, like OpenCRS, ask visitors to actually participate in making the government more transparent. OpenCRS (www.opencrs.com) is devoted to making reports from the Congressional Research Service, the official “think tank” of Congress, available to the public. CRS reports are public documents, prepared for members of Congress and their staffs, and any citizen can request one (usually through their local congressional office). But the CRS, unlike other Congressional agencies like the Congressional Budget Office, does not make its reports easily accessible online. OpenCRS asks citizens to request CRS reports and pass them on so they can be posted online. This provides a useful service – but of course it doesn’t require deliberation.

SourceWatch (www.SourceWatch.org) takes the transparency effort further in the realm of deliberative democracy. The goal of SourceWatch, a wiki created by the Center for Media and Democracy, is to monitor the hidden worlds of the lobbying and public relations industries in politics. Frequently advocacy groups and “think tanks” portrayed as independent analysts are in fact funded by industries and lobbying groups with a stake in the debate. In particular, SourceWatch is interested in “front groups,” organizations that claim to be independent advocacy groups but who are in fact funded by industries. SourceWatch

asks participants to be “citizen journalists,” bringing what they know to the table. The organization does have one full-time editor to police entries. The organization boasts nearly 37,000 articles on public relations firms, think tanks, industry-sponsored groups and journalists. The Center for Media and Democracy has also launched Congresspedia ([http://www.congresspedia.com](#)), devoted to profiling members of Congress.

SourceWatch borrows heavily from Wikipedia in its policies, but the fundamental rules are “be fair” and stick to the “documented facts.” The fact that it has full-time staff editors provides a mechanism for dealing with inaccuracies, although it’s important to note that no one examines articles before they are posted – the editors’ job is to catch problems after the fact. Since it uses the same “MediaWiki” platform as Wikipedia, the SourceWatch pages offer a “discussion” option where people can debate the quality of the entry – but unlike Wikipedia, these pages are open only to registered users.

Wikipedia itself is an interesting example of how discussion can happen around a task. The goal of Wikipedia is to produce an encyclopedia, but if you look at the discussion page behind controversial articles, you’ll often find a vibrant discussion on the topic, framed around whether the article is accurate. Often these discussions turn into flame wars, as on any other site, but the framework of the article at hand gives the discussion an organic focus that so much online discussion lacks. This, along with SourceWatch, suggests a different model for engaging in civic participation online.

Another Sunlight Foundation-funded project, PublicMarkup.org, takes it a step further. PublicMarkup uses wiki technology to allow users to actually edit a piece of legislation – in this case, the Transparency in Government Bill of 2008, a bill originally written by the Sunlight Foundation which would increase access to public records. In Congress, bills are frequently crafted by outside groups. Use of the Internet for “public comment” on regulations and legislation has been going on for a decade, and has proved a useful, if not groundbreaking, addition to traditional public comment techniques. By contrast, the Sunlight Foundation put the text of the entire bill up on its site and invited participants to edit it as they would. The eventual version would be presented to legislators.

Sunlight admits that they don’t see PublicMarkup as a solution to more transparent legislation in itself, and the response was fairly small (about 125 user entries on the bill during the open period), But the wiki concept clearly has potential for drawing interested citizens into the legislative process – and the nature of a wiki lays the groundwork for actually debating the values of the legislation.

Get Bipartisan Buy-in: 10Questions.org

Deliberative democracy, on or off-line, isn’t just about technology. The right platform can enable good discussion and collaboration, and the wrong one can certainly impede it. But the platform does not ensure nonpartisan or bipartisan participation. There’s nothing in the technology of blogs or message boards that causes people to self-select out by ideology. To actually gather a crowd that hasn’t already made up its mind requires outreach and a willingness among those you reach to believe the playing field will be fair.

10 Questions, an initiative by TechPresident, had tremendous success in drawing a bipartisan crowd. TechPresident is a blog on the use of technology in the 2008 presidential campaign put together by Personal Democracy Forum, the major U.S. conference on politics and technology. The concept behind 10 Questions was actually quite simple. Participants would submit their own video asking a question for all the presidential candidates. Users would vote on the 10 best questions. Then the questions would be submitted to the candidates for their video responses.

Some 243 videos were submitted, and more than 145,000 votes were cast. The questions had the virtue of going into much different territory than most of the media coverage. The top-ranked question was on Net neutrality, which didn’t get much media attention at all in the primaries. Some of the other 10 questions included “is America unofficially a theocracy,” medical marijuana, and abolishing “corporate personhood.” (The full list is available at www.10questions.org).

But the real success of 10 Questions was not the questions themselves, nor the responses from the candidates. Indeed, only five of the presidential candidates submitted responses: Obama, Edwards, Gravel and Kucinich for the Democrats and Huckabee for the Republicans. The success of 10 Questions was in the bipartisan support the initiative got from other Web sites. Backers included major media organizations like MSNBC and The New York Times, which certainly drew traffic. In the blogosphere, however, the project was endorsed by sites as different as the Huffington Post and Daily Kos on the left to Instapundit and Red State on the right. This gave the project bipartisan credibility, and more importantly, a bipartisan audience. The submissions seemed to come from all points of view, and the final 10 questions selected by the voters show a mix of liberal and conservative concerns.

A key element in this was the nature of TechPresident itself. The bias of TechPresident and the Personal Democracy Forum is only that technology is reshaping politics. The conference and its associated blogs welcome people of all political stripes, and that certainly gave 10 Questions credibility across the ideological spectrum.

Public Agenda has had a similar experience with its Facing Up to the Nation's Finances initiative, a nonpartisan effort to deal with the national debt and the long-term fiscal challenge. We found Public Agenda's own reputation for nonpartisanship, and the fact that the Facing Up initiative includes organizations as diverse as the Heritage Foundation and the Brookings Institution, gave the initiative credibility on both sides of the aisle. On our Web site, FacingUp.org, we were able to create a blog carnival on fiscal issues that drew from both conservative and liberal bloggers – a rare accomplishment.

Those dual advantages – a nonpartisan host and bipartisan outside support – are critical to building online engagement initiatives that break out of the current partisan divide.

Bring Experts and Citizens Together: NewAssignment.Net

One of the major concerns of the public engagement movement is the role of expertise in society. In traditional politics, and even in more in the traditional efforts at “public outreach” and “public comment,” experts tend to wall off the public. In a wide range of fields, from education to environment to foreign policy, we have “professionalized” policy making. Decisions are largely in the hands of civil servants and interest group staffers who have devoted their lives to a problem. Clearly, there are benefits to that – someone who's devoted their lives to a subject (and presumably to public service) has built up a level of knowledge and professionalism that few average citizens can meet.

But in case after case, in public engagement projects across the country, we've seen the unintended consequence of professionalism: the alienation of the public from policy. In fact, in our public engagement work a “gap” between experts and the public on policy issues is so common as to be a routine barrier that needs to be overcome. Because few in the public have spent as much time researching problems as the experts have, they don't have the same knowledge base. Since they're drawing on their day-to-day experiences and media coverage, rather than in-depth research, the public often frames the issue in very different terms than experts. Frequently their starting point for the political debate is something experts consider simplistic or naïve.

For example, Public Agenda's research in education shows that educators and business leaders are gravely concerned about the state of math and science education, and the threat to America's international standing. By contrast, parents – who are vitally concerned about the quality of schools – are much more concerned that their children learn “the basics” and about school discipline (which few education policymakers really want to address).⁶

Most experts understand that this perception gap exists, but their preferred way of dealing with it is by lecturing the public and offering a “data dump” of what they think citizens need to know. “Once the public

⁶ Kadlec, Alison, Friedman, Will, and Ott, Amber, “Important But Not For Me: Kansas and Missouri Students and Parents Talk About Math, Science and Technology Education,” Public Agenda, 2007

knows what I know, they'll understand why my solution is right," they reason. And if anyone in the public challenges their understanding of the issue, the experts are likely to go into defensive mode and reject whatever they hear. Nor do they easily accept the idea of collaborating with the public on solutions. A public hearing, the normal way of getting citizen input on policy, provides feedback for a policy that's already been crafted; it doesn't actually craft something new.

So how can experts and the public work together online? There are a number of interesting experiments from the field of "citizen journalism." Citizen journalism embraces the idea that in the digital world, anyone can be a reporter – and even their own publisher. Blogging is an obvious example of this and so is YouTube. But clearly the quality of these sites varies widely. Some are excellent, some are terrible. Some have in fact grown into sophisticated media forces, like Talking Points Memo and the Huffington Post.

At first, mainstream media organizations rejected these new voices out of hand. Newsrooms have long been tradition-bound places, deeply invested in their own professionalism. But now, under substantial economic stress, many organizations are opening themselves up to citizen participation. Often this is simply in the realm of accepting citizen video submissions, as both the BBC and CNN have done for some time.

But the most intriguing efforts attempt to blend the best of both worlds. NewAssignment.Net, founded by New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen, has created a series of experiments in "pro-am" journalism, where citizen journalists work together with professionals. The first attempt was Assignment Zero, in partnership with Wired magazine, where more than 900 citizen journalists and professional editors worked together, with the professionals acting as mentors. Based on their skill and interest, citizen journalists might be assigned any piece of a reporter's usual work, from digging out sources online, conducting interviews or actually writing articles. The resulting reportage was published in Wired in 2007 (zero.newassignment.net).

Further activities include Off the Bus, in collaboration with Huffington Post on the 2008 presidential campaign, in which citizen reporters are given assignments to cover the campaign, including events in their communities. The goal is (in a twist on the classic book on pack journalism, "On the Bus,") to bring new voices into campaign coverage. Beatblogging.org is designed to enable specialty reporters (who cover a specific beat) to use social networking to connect with experts and interested citizens on their coverage.

These "pro-am" projects suggest a model for ways other kinds of experts can engage with the public. If professional editors can mentor and collaborate with interested citizens on stories, why can't educators create social networks of parents on learning plans? Why can't environmental regulators and citizens collaborate on a Superfund plan? The possibilities of civic institutions enlisting interested citizens who buy into the institution's values and are willing to actually do some of the organization's fundamental work are endless.

Of course, there are those in the online world who argue that the "wisdom of crowds" can match the knowledge of experts, and usually point to Wikipedia as an example. And it's true that the best work on Wikipedia is quite good – but the bad work can be very bad. Since the work on Wikipedia is iterative, evolving over months or even years as the "anyone can edit" process evolves, there's no guarantee than a particular article will be accurate at the moment you want to access it.⁷

It's also worth noting that while Wikipedia has no professional editors, it has an elaborate dispute-resolution system, and a cadre of several thousand devoted "Wikipedians" who take it on themselves to help police the site. There are also a number of "projects" devoted to improving Wikipedia coverage on specific topics. The fact that anyone can edit does not mean that anyone's edit is the final word.

In any case, while the debate over whether crowd wisdom can match experts and professionals may continue to rage, the fact is that expertise is too well embedded in our political system to ignore.

⁷ Levine, Robert, The Many Voices of Wikipedia, Heard in One Place, the New York Times, Aug. 7, 2006

Professionals hold the levers of day-to-day power in society, and you can't realistically implement policy without them. Their experience can help the "crowd" avoid pitfalls that others have run into before. But policy professionals, like candidates, journalists and many in the business world, have to learn to "let go" and cope with this new, engaged world. NewAssignment suggests new ways that professionals and citizens can work together amicably to solve problems, surmounting one of the biggest challenges to any public engagement project.

Harness Creativity: World Without Oil

There's no question that games are one of the most intense new media experiences. Video games, which have been one of the most vibrant sectors of the technology world for two decades, have received little respect. The debate over video gaming has focused almost entirely on its violence and potentially baleful consequences for teenagers. And among the techno-savvy, gamers are viewed as a particularly intense and exclusive subculture, drawing their inspiration as much from Tolkien and Dungeons and Dragons as from Silicon Valley.

In this realm, however, the "serious games movement" is a strong and growing force. "Serious games" use the technology of video games and virtual worlds to have an educational impact on the real world, rather than as pure entertainment. So far, however, serious games are largely meant to persuade, inform or educate the gamer, not to allow them to deliberate. Many are created by advocacy organizations with the explicit goal of persuading gamers to their point of view, subtly or not. Others are rooted in the world of educational software and attempt to inform the gamer. There is also the growing category of "advergames" used for marketing purposes.

A strong point of view is common in serious games. Most are crafted to persuade the gamer to that point of view, not to lay out options in a neutral manner. In some cases, the whole point of the game is to persuade the player that the system depicted is either unwinnable or immoral – and by extension, so is current policy in the real world.

The McDonald's Game, developed by Molleindustria, is a fairly sophisticated game that takes the player through the entire production chain of the fast food industry, from raising cows to running restaurants. The point of the game, however, is to show that the fast-food industry is destructive and unsustainable. The player simply cannot raise enough cows without destroying land, or make profits without sacrificing employees' living standards. Another serious game, Disaffected, designed by NYU professor and games analyst Ian Bogost, shows the emptiness and frustration in working for Kinko's, and by extension, other service jobs.

It's hardly a revelation that role-playing is fundamental to video gaming. Most video gaming is heavily influenced by early fantasy games like Dungeons and Dragons, and the whole point of such games is to be someone other than yourself. Most serious games try to harness role-playing to "put yourself in the other guy's shoes." The goal in most cases is not merely education but empathy, and the hope that the player will turn to activism offline.

One of the best-known examples is Darfur is Dying, developed by a group of University of California students as part of a contest run by MTV. The player selects a Sudanese avatar, who goes foraging for food and water or tries to survive in a refugee camp, while trying to avoid militias. (But the game discourages certain avatars – adult males, players are told, are most likely to be killed). Unlike the vast majority of commercial video games, the player isn't trying to kill, and couldn't even if he wanted to. The goal is mere survival.

Another notable recent example is ICED – I Can End Deportation, produced by students at CUNY/Brooklyn College and the nonprofit group Breakthrough. In this game, the player becomes an illegal immigrant trying to avoid arrest, detention and deportation. This game has a strong point of view, with Breakthrough saying the game "teaches the player about the current U.S. policies around immigration that destroy families and fundamental human rights."

But in all these games, the experience is defined by the gamemaker, rather than the players. They can't change the rules or redefine the problem – which is where so much of the potential of digital democracy lies. So if serious games are mostly attempting to promote a point of view, where does public engagement come in? Where is the opportunity to discuss alternatives, or even create new ones? How can the seductive power of gaming be harnessed to the creativity of the individual user?

Probably the most suggestive model for a deliberative game may be World Without Oil, an alternative reality game about an energy crisis produced by Independent Lens and funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The unique approach of World Without Oil (www.worldwithoutoil.org) is that while the gamemakers set the basic parameters of the scenario – the price and supply of fuel and broad political events – the players fill in the blanks with their own (fictional) experiences. More than 1,900 players submitted some 1,500 blog posts or YouTube videos over 32 weeks last year, describing how the oil shock affected their own lives and communities. Many posed their own possible solutions and prompted discussions on their own. (Notably, this fictional 2007 oil shock started with prices jumping to \$4.16 a gallon).

World Without Oil's creators describe it as a game, although there's no mechanism for keeping score. In that sense, World Without Oil is much like the "tabletop" games used by military strategists and policy analysts to practice crisis management." In other ways the game is better described as an exercise in collaborative fiction, and as such it naturally tends toward the dramatic (starvation, refugees fleeing unsustainable cities and suburbs, "red zones" where law and order break down). But the participants were heavily engaged in shaping their "alternate reality," and the simulation evolved in ways quite different from how experts and the general public usually talk about energy. Many participants focused on the concept of highly self-sustaining local communities, for example.

This is the most intriguing part of World Without Oil – the way thousands of people collectively envisioned a different kind of world, and how they could respond to it. That is what public engagement is all about; except that in real-world public engagement, people get to reshape the world they already live in, as true participants, not as spectators to the game of politics, not as passengers on a ship of state controlled by others, but as fully involved citizens.