

A New Agora? The Internet and Everyday Deliberative Democracy

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1. Introduction

Can the promise of the Internet meet the challenge of fostering a more direct, inclusive and deliberative democracy? The idea of a deliberative democracy originates with the German philosopher Juergen Habermas (Jones 2006: 36). In a *deliberative* democracy, a heterogeneous collection of citizens with diverse opinions come together in the ‘public realm’ to engage in structured debate, free of coercion, (hopefully) to reach considered judgments about an issue of common good (Ginsborg 2008: 59). A deliberative democracy provides a more inclusive and thus legitimate procedure for resolving conflicts and making public policy decisions. As such, it could potentially engender a greater sense of community and citizen responsibility, both of which have become increasingly fractured (Witschge 2002: 5). Moreover, proponents of deliberative democracy, such as James Fishkin and Bruce Ackerman, believe that deliberations will lead to greater consensus on issues of public policy (Ackerman, Fishkin 2005).

Many theorists have doubts about deliberative democracy. Cass Sunstein, a prominent academic at Harvard Law School, argues that deliberation between like-minded individuals tends to cause further polarisation towards extremes, rather than convergence towards consensus (Sunstein 2001, 2007). Jon Elster, the Norwegian philosopher, raises questions about inequalities of representation. He asks, “Does the unequal distribution of education, information and commitment pose a threat to deliberative democracy? Will deliberation produce all of its good effect if it takes place mainly within an elite that is self-selected because it knows more than others about public issues and is more concerned about them?” (Elster 1998: 16).

Whether these concerns are valid will likely come into focus as experiments in deliberative democracy are taking place throughout the world – from small towns in California, Bulgaria, and China, to Europe-wide deliberations on the topic of EU Enlargement (Fishkin 2008, 2007, 2005, 2007). As the Internet provides an unlimited space for people to engage in political discussion and deliberation, what role is the Internet likely to play in the quest for a more deliberative democracy? Can the Internet serve as a new agora for the 21st century, a modern day analogue to the market place of democratic engagement in Ancient Greece?

The ‘public realm’, and the sort of deliberation that Habermas envisions, occurs on two levels. It happens first at the interface between the government and the citizen, in formal channels, where it ideally feeds back into policy-making (for example, town hall meetings and public consultations). Deliberation also happens in various civil society organisations, between citizens, without the direct involvement of the government. Governments are increasingly expanding formal channels for online deliberative citizen engagement; many interesting and successful examples exist and will be discussed in this chapter. However, Demos has argued that these initiatives have “in-built limits”. “Either they are not sufficiently connected to real power to have any purchase, or they ... have little political leverage on wider public attitudes or political culture” (Bentley 2005: 36).

Thus, while we can look at international trends of how governments are utilising the Internet to increase formal channels of consultation, it is also important to consider how the government can support the informal channels – comment sections, blogs, online forums and chatrooms – where conversations about politics and the public good occur every day. Two lessons can be drawn from the UK experience. First, governments can strengthen the quality of informal deliberation by increasing access to public information for non-commercial innovation and reuse. Second, they can encourage a ‘culture of innovation’ among civil society organisations, giving support to user-generated websites and encouraging citizens to participate in the design of deliberative engagement initiatives on the Internet.

2. The Digital Public Realm and Informal Online Deliberation

“If there is still to be a realistic application of the idea of sovereignty of the people to highly complex societies, it must be uncoupled from the concrete understanding of its embodiment in physically present members of a collectivity.” (Habermas 1992: 451)

The appeal for a more deliberative democracy is based on the fact that “actual citizenries bear little resemblance to the democratic ideal” (Luskin, Fishkin and Iyengar 2004: 2). They make snap judgements on the basis of simple cues, cognitive shortcuts and the pre-formed opinions of others who themselves are likely not particularly knowledgeable: in today’s world, opinions are formed on the basis of sound bytes, Internet rumours or edited YouTube clips. Deliberation in the public sphere is meant to cleanse our minds of these biases by forcing us to move beyond our like-minded sphere of comfort where we seek refuge from critical assessment. Thus, one of the fundamental conditions for deliberative democracy is divergence of opinion between heterogeneous groups of citizens. Through deliberation, individuals are

forced to give reasons for their opinions, consider the opinions of others and appeal to “common interests” in terms that everyone could accept (Witschge 2002: 6).

On the one hand, the Internet has extended a ‘public realm’ to millions of people on a global scale, by providing a space for private individuals to come together in conversation and organisation around issues of public good. Millions of political conversations occur every day on the Internet, but to what extent is the Habermasian deliberation happening in the broader web? Most of the conversations that take place via the Internet tend to occur between individuals with similar opinions, thus failing to meet the necessary precondition of a plurality of opinions for deliberation. As Douglas Arthur MP points out in the Foreword to the Demos’ Pamphlet *Open Source Democracy*: “The networks the Web creates allow us to bring people together who have shared interests -- it starts from a point of shared agreement or reference. Democracy is about the resolution of competing claims -- competing visions of the good society -- in an arena which is open to all” (Rushkoff 2003: 13).

Compounding this is the ability the Internet provides to filter information intake: to create the “Daily Me”. Cass Sunstein argues that while filtering information is convenient, it potentially increases polarisation and fragmentation on the Internet, creating echo chambers where arguments are insulated against criticism (Sunstein 2001). The result of such like-minded deliberation is group polarisation, causing extremes to become more extreme as they exclude moderate, dissenting voices. Sunstein argues that the Internet can also give rise to “social cascades” where individuals become susceptible to rumours in the absence of information to the contrary. As the Internet becomes an increasingly fractured media through information filtering, cascades become more frequent and more likely to occur, making the prospect of online deliberation more elusive.

While Sunstein’s critique is salient in some instances, there is the likelihood that it is overstated and simply ignores the existence of many forums – from popular, user-generated websites to blogs, to the comment pages in major newspapers – where people with different opinions engage in a reasoned debate about issues of public importance. These informal deliberations are much less structured and sometimes far more expressive (as opposed to rational) (Hannon, Bradwell, Tims 2008). This does not make them any less relevant. In fact, because they are more integrated into our everyday lives, they are perhaps even more relevant and our efforts should focus on encouraging deliberation in these spaces. In *Everyday Democracy*, Tom Bentley argued that effective citizen engagement would not be realised through more consultation exercises, or ad hoc institutional fixes (Bentley 2005). As one-off

events, formal deliberative exercises fail to create a greater sense of citizen responsibility towards participation. In the current structure of their private lives, people simply do not have time to devote to interminable policy deliberations. Instead, we need to embed the principles of democracy into the informal actions of our everyday lives.

The Internet provides an informal, everyday space in which people can become more engaged 'citizens'. As Yochai Benkler argues, the Internet gives voice to more people, providing them with more information, and allowing the expression of more views, which may eventually encourage citizens to become more critically engaged in debating and choosing opinions on the basis of myriad factors (Benkler 2006). It is also drawing a wider range of people – especially young people – into democratic debate. During the 2004 Presidential election, 44 percent of Internet users who engaged in political discussion over the Internet in the US had never before been involved in politics (Leadbeater 2008: 179). The same is the case in the UK, where the majority of individuals who participated in the Digital Dialogue case studies had not been active in politics previously (Ferguson 2007). Although formal political engagement has decreased, the Internet is encouraging more people to take interest in politics through informal, non-governmental channels. "Party politics matters less because they have so many other channels: wristband campaigns, international NGOs, local action groups and so on" (Bentley 2005: 32).

It remains to be seen whether a majority of young people will be drawn from these informal debates to engage in deliberative discussions in formal government channels. However, if we consider the debate through the prism of Demos' Everyday Democracy, then perhaps it is nearly as important at this point that they are, in fact, becoming more politically conscious and potentially incorporating politics into their everyday lives through informal 'deliberation'. A fledgling political consciousness may lead a 15 year old to visit websites for Greenpeace and Amnesty International, and engage in debates in the comment sections of YouTube, but will it develop into a desire to actually participate in government-operated deliberation forums and workshops?

3. International Trends

Governments worldwide are feeling increased pressure to build their ICT capacities in order to improve the efficiency of government administration and engagement with citizens. There are three ways in which governments are utilising the Internet to increase engagement:

1. Communication – using the Internet to communicate values, policy goals and ideals.

The Internet can serve as a tool for informing citizens, but equally as a tool for

propaganda. **Tools:** RSS, Email, text messaging, podcasts, blogs, webcasts and social networking sites.

2. Consultation – creating channels of citizen engagement to solicit citizen opinion through forums, chatrooms, blogs, and Web 2.0 social networking and user-generated content sites. Consultation can happen at various stages in the policy-making process: agenda-setting, analysis, formulation, implementation and feedback/monitoring. The OECD reported that the majority of online engagement initiatives take place at the agenda-setting phase of the policy-making process. (“Engaging Citizens Online for Better Policy-making”, OECD, Policy Briefing, March 2003). **Tools:** Social networking sites, online consultations, online forums, epanels, e-petitions, wikis, 21st century town hall meetings, e-communities, e-referenda.
3. Provision – providing information that may be useful to citizens: including crime, health and environmental statistics, legislative debates and evidence. Information provision strengthens transparency and accountability, as well as value to citizens if information is made available for non-commercial reuse to create ‘mash-ups’. Mash-ups refer to the process of taking disparate forms of information and media and combining them to realise new tools and value. **Tools:** Search engines, mapping tools, wikis.

All manner of countries are trying to adapt to a Web 2.0 world by utilising a variety of media, including RSS, email, text messages, podcasts and social networking sites to accomplish the three objectives outlined above. In the most recent E-Government Survey conducted by the UN, countries were assessed on infrastructural capacity and broadband access (e-readiness) as well as use for engagement with citizens (e-participation). (UN E-Government Survey 2008, From E-Government to Connected Governance.) The goal that the UN sets out is that of ‘connected governance’, with governments communicating seamlessly across departments, providing greater efficiency internally as well as externally in service provision and communication with citizens.

Many governments are attempting to develop ‘connected governance’ through a centralised approach due to previous existing power structures, weak federal principles and fear of devolving away too much control. However, such an approach is contrary to the structure of innovation and organisation to which the Internet has given rise, based on widespread collaboration and open intelligence (Mulgan, Steinberg, Salem 2005). The UN report warns that, “if governments continue to use a top-down approach to implement e-government

services and solutions, there is a real danger that these services and solutions will not be fully utilised by the citizens they were intended to serve” (UN E-Government Survey 2008: 67). Decentralised approaches, on the other hand, must achieve ‘interoperability’ between same-tier and different-tier government bodies. The challenge is to combine interoperability with the freedom for local community and government innovation to tailor Internet up-take to the contours of local communities.

Obstacles to developing greater ICT capacity, though common in nature, are different for developed than developing countries. Most immediately, developing countries face political impediments and lack basic infrastructure and access. However, even if these obstacles are overcome, developing countries will struggle with significant gaps in terms of ICT skills of government officials and citizens. Improving skills, particularly in the government, is also still an issue in many developed countries. One of the most significant obstacles for developed countries is ensuring coordination between back office policies and procedures, and front office delivery. The OECD report, and the UK’s *Digital Dialogues* (discussed below), emphasise the need for significant investment in people and time to facilitate, moderate and organise online engagement initiatives, as well as extensive public relations and promotion to raise the public awareness of online consultation channels. Governments need to provide clear official guidelines for their staff with regards to what can and cannot be discussed in online communications with citizens. These should take into account the fact that participants respond more favourably when it appears that governments are being open and speaking informally. It should also consider the possibility of government members and representatives communicating with citizens through pre-existing user-generated sites¹.

As the UN E-Government Survey demonstrates, innovation in ‘e-participation’ is not confined to any one geographical region. The top countries on the basis of e-participation are geographically diverse: the US, the Republic of Korea, Denmark and France (tied for third), Australia, New Zealand and Mexico. Notably, the UK dropped from the first spot in 2005 to the 25th spot in 2008 owing to the UN’s methodology, which only considered national government portals for engagement, and did not take into account efforts to devolve power to local governments and communities. Nevertheless, geographically, Europe leads the rest of the world, both in terms of capacity and participation.

The e-participation index is divided into e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making. At present, governments score the highest marks in terms of e-information and the lowest in

¹ Both of these recommendations are discussed further below, and are mentioned in the *Digital Dialogues* and *Power of Information* Reviews for the UK Government.

e-decision-making, with a mere 11 percent of countries surveyed committed. Yet, e-decision-making is the most important measure as it reflects the extent to which governments are incorporating citizen engagement into legislative decision-making. While trends will continue to see e-information and consultation initiatives rising, it is unlikely that we will see the same spike in e-decision-making.

Good practices in e-decision making can, however, be found and should be emulated. The leader in e-decision-making was the Republic of Korea, followed by Denmark and France. The website (www.epeople.go.kr) is one example of the Korean government's innovation. The website publishes responses and suggestions to government policy, highlighting comments which have won the attention of policy-makers for further discussion and debate. This type of feedback mechanism provides important incentives to citizens to actually use these engagement channels. Meanwhile, the French Government is using the Web to encourage citizen deliberation and debate of policy proposals through the French National Commission of Public Debate (CNDP). Citizens are provided with a range of different proposals that are currently being debated in government, as well as all the information necessary to make an informed decision. Matching up online with offline deliberation, citizens are encouraged to meet up in different cities to debate the different proposals, and those who are too shy or unable to attend in person can do so via the Web. Moreover, the CNDP utilises a variety of media to enhance debate, including blogs, chatrooms and online forums. Citizens can also upload photos or videos as debate contributions. What is most impressive about the French approach is the integration of both online and offline channels for the engagement process.

One thing we are likely to see more of, especially in Europe, is the codification of e-citizens rights documents, such as the Netherlands' e-Citizen Charter. This type of document, outlining the rights of citizens and the government's responsibilities, is key to providing a framework that is fair and can serve as a guide for government initiatives. We are also likely to see an increase in transnational attempts to devise laws, regulations and potentially a global bill of digital rights covering issues of privacy, intellectual property and access to technology. In *Video Republic*, Demos argued for a new global charter of digital rights, led by UNESCO and drawing on a wide range of stakeholders (Hannon, Bradwell, Tims 2008).

Finally, governments will increasingly use the Internet as a way to compare ideas about deliberative engagement initiatives and other ICT best practices happening throughout the world. The UK charity Involve, which is devoted to researching and implementing citizen engagement, has established a website that provides a library of engagement initiatives and

any other relevant information for interested parties. Similarly, the New Zealand Guide for Online Participation maintains a wiki for individuals to add interesting examples from abroad that might serve as templates on which New Zealand can model its policy.

Despite these initiatives, the Internet is still at present a private space: you have to purchase a computer and a connection to gain access. In order for the Internet to become a true public realm for deliberative democracy, governments first and foremost need to bridge the digital divide. The Internet is not a panacea for solving the democratic deficit. The technology of the Internet itself is flat and democratic; however, the inequalities that exist offline are simply transferred, and perhaps magnified, in the online world: many remain without access to the Internet and lack the skills and cultural support, as well as the time and effort to participate (Hannon, Bradwell, Tims 2008). If the digital divide persists, Web 2.0 engagement will only serve to entrench the inequalities of representation still further.

The upshot is that governments worldwide are feeling increased pressure to build the capacities to engage with citizens over the Internet. They are utilising a variety of media in order to increase and improve internal and external communications, provide better public services and create single and multiple-channel means for deliberative engagement with citizens. Yet, on the most important measure of e-decision-making, statistics stand at a woeful 11 percent. As the next section on the UK demonstrates, governments can realise significant gains through focusing on the release of information, devolving power to civil society organisations, and working with as opposed to competing with user-generated websites. The UN E-Government Survey is potentially misleading as it only measures government-created channels, thereby creating the impression that formal government channels are the only means by which countries can utilise the Internet to strengthen democracy. As the UK demonstrates, the best policy might instead entail the government deferring to civil society, working and communicating with citizens through non-governmental channels.

4. The UK Experience

"There aren't many (if any) countries that can boast this kind of innovation and enthusiasm shared by ministers and officials alike, not only using but actually understanding and implementing the very web 2.0 concepts of mash ups, crowdsourcing and collaboration. Praise is due." (Campbell 2008)²

² www.futuregovconsultancy.com/index.php/2008/08/18/translating-data-into-delivery [Download November 15th, 2008]

Despite falling on the basis of the UN's methodology, the UK is currently buzzing with ideas, initiatives and competitions on national and local levels of government, in addition to having a burgeoning private and third sector devoted to pushing the government 2.0 agenda. The two most notable independent reviews on the topic – *Digital Dialogues* and the *Power of Information* – were both initiated towards the end of Tony Blair's time as Prime Minister. However, it has really been under Gordon Brown's administration that the UK Government has taken the most significant steps, including the creation of the e-petitions Downing Street website and the "Ask the PM" webcast.

Digital Dialogues

Digital Dialogues, an independent review that was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and carried out by the Hansard Society, an independent charity in the UK, provided a comprehensive assessment of governmental departments and their practices of using the Internet for communication and consultation. UK ministers and MPs are increasingly employing new media to convey their messages, provide information and consult citizens. As of 2006, 560 MPs had websites, 39 MPs had blogs and both Gordon Brown and David Cameron had webcasts and channels on YouTube: "Ask the PM" and "WebCameron", respectively. Such webcasts attempt to create a two-way conversation between politicians and citizens, much in the style of the famous YouTube Democratic primary debate in the United States. While Demos' *Video Republic* found that such efforts are usually met with charges of "tokenism and spin", they provide evidence that UK politicians are trying desperately to use the Internet to appeal to and convey messages to more and younger voters.

Digital Dialogues helped initiate a number of engagement platforms with various government departments in a total of twenty-five case studies over the course of three phases. The Hansard Society documented the web platforms used for communication (for example, blogs, web chat, forums, networking sites, wikis), the form of engagement (listening, informing, deliberating) and the targeted user for each government case study. Some examples of the case studies included³:

- **Department for Communities and Local Government:**

- Online deliberative forum – discussion on topics likely for upcoming proposed legislation.

- **Department for Work and Welfare Pensions Reform**

³ Detailed assessments for each of the case studies can be found at www.digitaldialogues.co.uk.

Online deliberative forum – welfare reform;

Blog – “GenerationXperience” aimed to increase stakeholder participation in advocating for older people and ensuring better services.

- **Office of Children’s Commissioner**

Social Networking Site – to give voice to concerns of children and young people, especially the disadvantaged and vulnerable.

- **Sustainable Development Commission Panel**

ePanel – 600 experts in the field to contribute to the debate.

- **Office of National Statistics**

Blog – to get a sense of priorities for the next census in 2011.

- **David Milliband (Foreign & Commonwealth Office):** Blog

Like the example of France’s CNDP, *Digital Dialogues* found that online engagement methods are most successful when they are part of a ‘multi-channel’ approach towards citizen engagement. Moreover, online spaces could serve to encourage rolling, as opposed to one-off, participation of citizens. However, *Digital Dialogues* argued that high quality engagement requires a significant investment of resources beyond technology in order to moderate and facilitate discussion and assure participants that their comments are not being ignored: simply building a website is not sufficient. Moreover, participants responded favourably only when departments seemed open and forthcoming as opposed to reticent, which engendered distrust. *Digital Dialogues* also argued that the government needed to realise that it does not have a monopoly on ideas or websites; thus, it ought to support a ‘culture of innovation’, both inside and outside government in order to encourage the public to devise creative methods of digital engagement. One example of this is a competition entitled *Building Democracy*, which encourages the public to submit ideas for using digital technology to increase democratic engagement, awarding ten winners £15,000 to develop their ideas. Perhaps most interesting is that the Ministry of Justice encouraged individuals to submit their proposals on a website where other people could review them and make suggestions and comments before they were submitted (www.buildingdemocracy.co.uk).

Number 10 Downing Street: e-Petitions and Debate Mapping

The Number 10 Downing Street website (www.number10.gov.uk) is innovative in its use of different media, including podcasts, video and ‘virtual tours’ to communicate the Prime Minister’s policy initiatives. In 2006, a further step was taken to allow citizens to submit electronic petitions directly to the Prime Minister. The Number 10 e-petitions website was

designed by mySociety, an independent charity based in the UK. They boast that the e-petitions website is the “largest non-partisan democracy website by volume of users ever with over 8m signatures from over 5m unique email addresses, representing something like 10% of the entire UK population” (www.mysociety.org/projects/no10-petitions-website). Citizens can submit and/or sign petitions which are sent directly to the Prime Minister. If a petition receives more than 200 signatures, then it is reviewed by the Prime Minister’s office, sent to the relevant department for consideration and receives a detailed response. Yet, it is unclear how such a petition would then feed back into affecting substantive policy change. Would receiving a petition of 1,000,000 names in opposition to legislation banning foxhunting, for example, then result in the overturning of such legislation? Moreover, at present, no similar channel exists to submit petitions directly to Parliament.

Another interesting initiative on the Prime Minister’s website was the use of a Beta edition ‘Debate map’ used to break arguments down into component parts (for example, issues, premises, supporting arguments, opposing arguments) for more nuanced deliberation. Journalists and academics were invited to participate in discussions on a series of lectures given by Tony Blair before leaving office on topics such as public health, criminal justice, social exclusion and science policy. The debate mapping tool was provided by the company DebateGraph (www.debategraph.org). This type of debate mapping, assuming it is user-friendly, can be extremely helpful in facilitating deliberations at national and local levels.

While *Digital Dialogues* focused on national government, a substantial portion of engagement initiatives have focused on the smaller scale of local communities, where it is easier to create a two-way conversation and foster a greater sense of community cohesion. Charlie Leadbeater, who is sceptical of the Internet’s power to enhance democracy, argues that the web has so far failed to realise a successful deliberative conversation at the national level, but that it has succeeded in fostering formal deliberative conversation among local communities about local issues (Leadbeater 2008).

Local Forums and Initiatives

A number of local communities in Britain have created online forums for citizens to engage with one another and debate/raise issues of community concern.

- Harringay, a North London Borough (www.harringayonline.com),
- Newham (via eDemocracy Network; <http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/newham-issues>),

- Brighton & Hove (via eDemocracy Network; <http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/bh>).

Newham has been especially innovative in applying technology to public benefit, led primarily by its Mayor, Sir Robin Wales. Sir Wales organised the Bright Ideas Conference in Newham to bring together top players in the field of ICT to brainstorm and discuss new ways of increasing engagement and service provision in local communities (www.promarta.co.uk/brightideas/bireportv4.pdf). Other local British communities, such as Newcastle, Keighley, Sunderland, Harrow and Bristol have experimented with some form of participatory budgeting, which entails communal discussion, though the scope of these efforts thus far has been quite minimal.

Although it might seem absurd to use the Internet to communicate with those in your immediate neighbourhood when you could meet them face-to-face instead, the Internet can be used to facilitate community organisation and thus increase ‘social capital’ – that is, communities' ability to organise and accomplish goals, such as addressing nuisance behaviour. The Internet can also serve as a place to meet others as traditional community meeting places, such as churches, have seen a decline in importance. One of the main concerns, however, with these local initiatives is that they tend to be dominated by a minority of ‘community activists’ (Skidmore, Bound, Lownsbrough 2006: 6). Demos argued that this policy-capture by a group of elites is inevitable, and that the best way to mitigate it is to ensure that they are representative of the wider community. Local governments should also look at long-term approaches to governance that broaden the potential participation base. One Demos recommendation was to create local *Community Governance Service* in order to recruit, train and support participants (Skidmore, Bound, Lownsbrough 2006: 15).

Power of Information

In addition to *Digital Dialogues*, the government commissioned another independent review entitled the *Power of Information* (POI), conducted by Ed Mayo and Tom Steinberg of mySociety. Out of the many and detailed recommendations, the three main points can be summarised as follows:

1. Governments should “engage with users and operators of user-generated sites in pursuit of common social and economic objectives”.
2. “Supply innovators that are reusing government-held information with the information they need...in a way that maximises long-term benefits to citizens”.

3. “Protect the public interest by preparing citizens for a world of plentiful (and sometimes unreliable) information, and help excluded groups take advantage”.

Patient Opinion (www.patientopinion.org.uk/) and DirectGov (www.direct.gov.uk) are two examples of how governments should not compete with user-generated websites. Patient Opinion was a privately run website that allowed individuals to share information about the NHS and medical conditions. Following the POI recommendations, NHS Choices, the official government Health Service website, decided to provide its information to Patient Opinion to create mash-ups with its own data (Cross 2008). DirectGov was a website created by the government in order to put “all public service (information) in one place”. However, Tom Steinberg and others roundly criticised the website as being cluttered and inefficient, and instead created a stripped-down and more efficient website, ironically named “DirectionlessGov.com”

(www.idealgovernment.com/index.php/blog/comments/directgov_search_the_gift_that_keeps_on_givinggags/). Other examples of user-generated websites that the government should work to support and not compete with include Netmums (www.netmums.com), TheStudentRoom (www.thestudentroom.co.uk) and MoneySavingExpert (www.moneysavingexpert.com).

In terms of releasing information, Mayo and Steinberg argued that the government could realise significant benefits to the public at large by making it easier for individuals to reuse public sector information – such as maps, mortality statistics and timetables – to create innovative mash-ups which provide new value to citizens. One example is the creation of a Metropolitan Police Crime Map, which provides crime statistics for every borough and neighbourhood in London. In theory, such maps provide visual confirmation to what is already community knowledge; however, by doing so they apply pressure to the police department and government to focus on the areas with higher rates of crime. Interestingly, the Metropolitan Office chose to provide this information using Google Maps as opposed to the government-run OpenSpace mapping initiative overseen by the Ordnance Survey, which incidentally is changing its rules governing reuse in line with *Power of Information* recommendations.

mySociety

The basis of the *Power of Information* Review lies in the work and successes of Steinberg’s mySociety. MySociety’s goals are twofold: first, to give citizens easy access to useful websites that give “simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community aspects of their lives”

(www.mysociety.org/about), and second, to teach public and voluntary sectors how to utilise the Internet more efficiently to improve others' lives.

Some of mySociety's websites include:

- TheyWorkforYou
- WriteToThem
- FixOurStreet
- PledgeBank
- HearFromYourMP
- HassleMe
- Number 10 Downing Street e-petitions

Governments are often required to make information available for public viewing; however it is often an onerous process for the citizen to retrieve it. MySociety gathers the information and creates incredibly easy-to-use websites, putting the information within the grasp of even the most technologically challenged.

TheyWorkForYou is one of the most popular of mySociety's websites, and allows citizens to keep track of everything their MP does, including how they vote on government papers and what their contribution is to debates, speeches, and so on. FixMyStreet is another website which allows individuals to report and discuss local problems such as potholes, graffiti, vandalism and even faulty street lighting. The site allows individuals to upload pictures and then tracks the problem, including the length of time it takes for local councils to fix them.

mySociety vs. Our Kingdom

The successes of mySociety and the *Power of Information* review in the UK exposed a larger debate about how governments ought to be approaching Internet engagement policy in order to strengthen democracy. 'Our Kingdom' was an open and deliberative debate initiated by openDemocracy.net after conversations with members of the government. It was started to encourage British citizens to engage in a conversation about the future of Britain in the broadest sense, including its "institutions, constitution, administration, liberties, justice, peoples and media and their principles, beliefs, identity, destinations and character" (www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/v). As many interested parties in Britain saw it, 'Our Kingdom' and mySociety offered two starkly different approaches. On the one hand, 'Our Kingdom' represented 'mass scale deliberative democracy', while mySociety represented small, incremental changes.

Tom Steinberg and others, including David Wilcox, another expert in the field, argue that mass scale deliberative democracy exercises such as Our Kingdom are interesting, but that government and individuals working in Government 2.0 should focus their efforts on small, incremental initiatives which emphasise the freeing up of information. As Tom Steinberg puts

it, we should be more “realistic about the nature of actual progress in our field -- tiny, incremental, currently peaking with things like TheyWorkForYou and Stemwijzer.nl makes for more interesting, useful discussions than comparing everything to the Holy Grail of True, Mass Scale Deliberative Democracy” (Wilcox 2004).

5. Conclusion

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 marked the triumph of parliamentary democracy in Britain. As the Internet provides millions of people with access, information and the ability to self-organise, are we potentially on the verge of a new Glorious Revolution? Can the open source principles of Wikipedia lead to a collaborative form of government, making 20th century bureaucracies redundant? At this early point in time, we see governments attempting to mobilise their lumbering Weberian frames to adapt to a world demanding fundamental changes. The most successful governments will be those who ungrudgingly concede power to communities and citizens: who are willing to become more transparent and accountable: who are willing to accept the fact that they simply cannot compete with emergent user-generated ‘public realms’ to impose engagement channels from above.

Lessons from the UK emphasise how governments can take steps to encourage deliberative democracy in somewhat indirect ways, by strengthening the conditions for the informal channels of deliberation. First, governments can realise significant benefits and reduce false information on the Web by releasing public information and allowing citizens to create ‘mash-ups’ for non-commercial, public use. Second, governments should begin to use informal, non-governmental channels in order to engage with citizens in blogs and online forums. This will be a significant test for governments worldwide, which are accustomed to a tightly scripted and controlled use of political communication. However, if governments want to stay relevant and begin to earn back the citizens' trust, then openness and informal communication will be essential to the 21st century government. Finally, governments should seek to encourage a ‘culture of innovation’ by running competitions, like the Building Democracy competition, in order to generate ideas and citizen engagement in the design of Internet 2.0 initiatives.

As Tom Bentley wrote, “Institutional innovation, and the state’s ability to prompt it and adapt to it, is therefore the major domain in which democratic renewal can be pursued” (Bentley 2005: 51). The successful 21st century government will be a flexible, streamlined and highly networked entity, seamlessly entwined with civil society and individual citizens. It will not merely seek to impose deliberative engagement channels from above, but will instead work to

support and supplement the actions, deliberations and emerging innovations of a new breed of self-organising individuals in the informal and everyday reaches of the Internet. We are on the brink of what could be a revolutionary realignment of social power structures.

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