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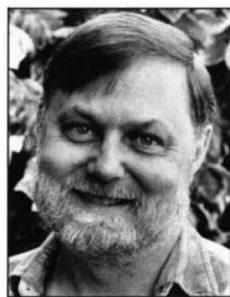


Table of Contents

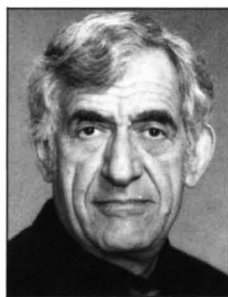
Volume 66, Number 2

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Journal Entries	4
Revitalizing Democracy Through Electronic Town Meetings by Duane Elgin	6
<i>Teledemocracy: Gathering Momentum in State and Local Governance</i> by Ted Becker	14
<i>Electronic Democracy: Jeffersonian Boom or Teraflop?</i> by Richard J. Varn	21
<i>Television: Political Participation's Enemy #1</i> by Curtis Gans	26



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Revitalizing Democracy Through Electronic Town Meetings

Our world is changing so fast that democracy is endangered unless citizens are involved continuously in setting policy direction. Modern technology offers the means to engage the public in participating in governance, but we must guard against the misuse of this technology. The author suggests ways to involve citizens in electronic town meetings that hold the potential to revitalize our democracy.

by Duane Elgin

Each generation must renew its contract with democracy in ways that respond to the changing needs of the times. In his inaugural speech, President Clinton rightly recognized the need for “bold and persistent experimentation” to revitalize democracy as we confront unprecedented challenges.

The United States confronts an enormous deficit, crumbling infrastructure, a failing education system, chronic drug abuse, violent crime, a health crisis and many other major problems. Compounding matters, many state and local governments are in gridlock. The nation seems to be adrift without a sense of purpose. Not surprisingly, many citizens feel powerless and disconnected from politics.

Global problems that threaten the domestic society and economy include climate change, ozone depletion, rain forest devastation, dwindling oil reserves, mounting population, the extinction of plant and animal species and many more. Economic progress is turned into ecological devastation as the biosphere is wounded by humanity’s actions.

These challenges are so severe and persistent that a rapid and profound change is essential in the manner of living, working and consuming in industrial nations. To deliberately make changes in the workings of an entire civilization presents an unprecedented challenge for governance. We must do more than restore the economy and society of the past; we must build a new economy, society and mode of governance that can carry us into a changing future.

The Opportunity to Revitalize Democracy

Abraham Lincoln said, "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed." To respond to current challenges, we need a communicating democracy where public sentiments are mobilized on behalf of constructive action. We need an informed democracy where citizens regularly engage in dialogues among themselves and with elected leaders.

A strong democracy is impossible with weak citizen participation. Because communication is the lifeblood of democracy, a whole new level of citizen communication is needed to revitalize governance. Until recently, this would have been impossible. No longer. A communications revolution is providing citizens and governments with the tools to build a new level of understanding and consensus. The most prominent technology in this revolution is television (which is evolving rapidly into a multimedia system that is integrated with computers, telephones, satellites and other technologies).

In the United States, 98 percent of all homes have a television set (more than have stoves, refrigerators or indoor toilets); the average person watches more than four hours per day, and a majority of people get most of their news about their community and world from this medium. If important issues or choices do not appear on television then, for all practical purposes, they do not exist in our mass social consciousness.

Television has become the "social brain" or "central nervous system" of our society and democracy. With the speed of light, television can extend our involvement to the entire planet. Through the eyes of television, we can see urban decay in New York, violent crime in California, homelessness in Florida, starving villagers in Africa and the destruction of rain forests in Brazil. Given the power and pervasiveness of television, we can build a more conscious democracy.

A conscious democracy pays attention. Recognizing that "the price of freedom is eternal vigilance," a conscious democracy is watchful. In the past, only a great tragedy or shock could break through the distractions of everyday life and arouse the public into momentary wakefulness. Soon afterwards, however, a new issue, emergency or scandal would overtake social awareness, pushing aside earlier concerns. A semiconscious democracy is no match for current domestic and global challenges. We need a conscious democracy that is attentive to trends that demand action.

Power in democracy is the power to build and mobilize a working consensus to support policy initiatives. Without a strong and sustained consensus, political support for creative and innovative policies will wither and collapse. The ability to build a working consensus in the new world of unprecedented challenges depends upon the ability to continuously communicate with the public. No longer can a single election provide a mandate for governance. We have entered an era where change is so dramatic and so rapid that we need a continuous campaign, engaging the public in an ongoing process at dialogue and consensus building.

Lech Walesa of Poland was once asked what caused the democratic revolution that swept through Eastern Europe. He pointed to a TV set and remarked, "It all came from there." Although many government officials recognize mass media's power to impact the political consciousness of citizens, historically there has been little enthusiasm among public officials for encouraging citizens to use television to engage more fully in the governing process. Now that citizens need to get more directly involved, the time is ripe to reconsider the roles of the public, the mass media and governments. We require a new partnership between citizens, governments and the mass media if we are to revitalize democracy with a more effective process of communication and consensus building. Adjustments are required from everyone involved:

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• First, government officials at every level will need to accept new voices. In addition to media professionals, public officials will increasingly hear

the engaged and passionate voices of concerned citizens and communities.

• Second, media professionals will need to accept citizens as participants in the policy process as they play a larger role in defining the agenda and participating in televised discussions.

• Third, the public will need to move beyond passivity and take charge of its own dialogue and feedback processes.

These new relationships will require patience and flexibility as the creative process of designing a more conscious democracy unfolds.

Three ingredients are vital for revitalizing democracy: an informed citizenry that talks to itself and knows its own mind and engages in regular dialogue with its leaders. Although I want to emphasize the latter and the potential for interactive communication to revitalize democracy, the foundation for success is an informed and knowledgeable public.

If television has become our social brain, then it is legitimate to be concerned about our society's IQ. Currently, more than 90 percent of prime-time hours on broadcast television are devoted to entertainment and less than 10 percent to informational programming. When commercial breaks and info-tainment are factored in, the time the television industry devotes to informational programming shrinks much further. We are entertainment rich and knowledge poor. Our situation is like that of a long-distance runner who prepares for a marathon by eating 95 percent junk food. We are trying to run modern democracies on a diet of TV entertainment at the very time we confront challenges of marathon proportions.

If we are to revitalize democracy, then a first requirement is for a hearty and robust diet of socially relevant programming that educates citizens about the critical issues and choices that we face — as communities, states

and a nation. We require far more documentaries and investigative reports. We need programs that show us the tradeoffs and choices between different ways to allocate scarce resources. We need vivid scenarios of the future that show what life could be like depending upon our course of action.

Power in a democracy depends on the ability of citizens and leaders to coalesce and maintain a working consensus on policy initiatives and directions. If the public's understanding of choices and tradeoffs is weak, then the consensus that emerges from electronic dialogues will be weak. The first ingredient in a strong democracy is a well-informed public. Elected leaders at every level of government need to call for television programming (as well as coverage by newspapers, magazines and radio) that supports an informed debate among citizens about issues critical to our future.

The last taboo topic on television is television itself and how television has failed to meet its legal obligation to serve the public interest. Because the television industry has not developed informational programming at a pace equal to our rapidly escalating challenges, we confront a communications gap that threatens the workings of democracy. To close the gap will require, at a minimum, more accountability for the TV industry, more diligence by broadcasters to fulfill their legal obligation to serve the public interest and a dramatic increase in funding for public affairs television. Assuming that the public gets the level, diversity and quality of information it needs, then interactive communications can support an authentic, rapid and dramatic invigoration of democracy.

Electronic Town Meetings

Democracy has been called "the art of the possible." However, when a society enters an era of change and people don't know what their fellow citizens think and feel about critical choices, then neither the public nor the politicians know what is possible. Instead, the democratic process drifts aimlessly and is unable to mobilize citizens into constructive action. To revitalize democracy, citizens must have an ongoing way to "know their own minds" as an entire community. The most direct way to discover our collective sentiments is through electronic town meetings or ETMs.

The concept of ETMs means different things to different people. For some, it conjures up images of a televised program where viewers call to ask questions of elected leaders. For others, it suggests a live debate, such as at a city-council meeting, where members of the public ask questions or make comments. For others, it implies a public affairs TV show with telephone numbers flashed on the TV screen to allow viewers to voice their reaction to the issue under discussion. While these are valid forms of electronic dialogue, they do not use the full potential of our powerful communication technologies.

There are two basic requirements for revitalizing democracy via ETMs. First, citizens and decision-makers must be able to obtain accurate feed-

back regarding public sentiments. Second, feedback must be fast enough to enable citizens to give more than a single knee-jerk response to an issue raised during a televised town meeting.

Interactive processes need to enable a representative group of citizens to answer questions that explore the direction, texture, depth and intensity of public sentiments on critical policy issues. These requirements can be met. With existing technologies, we can obtain rapid and representative feedback from a preselected scientific sample of citizens who use their home telephones for dialed-in "voting."

Just as a doctor can take a small sample of blood and use it to acquire an accurate picture of the total condition of one's body, we can use feedback from a randomly selected sample of citizens to get a highly accurate sense of community (or state or national) views. By drawing upon a scientific sample of citizens who are watching the ETM and dialing in their "votes," the number of respondents is kept small enough to avoid overloading the phone lines. With a random sample, feedback can be obtained within one or two minutes, making it possible to poll on multiple questions during a single ETM.

A practical example of this design was developed in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1987 with a prime-time ETM on broadcast television. This pioneering experiment was developed through the cooperative efforts of Choosing Our Future, a nonprofit and nonpartisan media organization, and the local ABC-TV station. Prior to ETM, a cross section of the public in the metropolitan region was identified with the assistance of a university-based survey research center. Two weeks before the ETM, citizens were invited to participate. Those who agreed were sent a list of phone numbers that corresponded to various options. Although the only options for the pilot were yes/no, technology exists to register multiple choice responses and intensity of feeling responses.

The San Francisco ETM pilot began with an informative minidocumentary to place the issue in context, then moved to an in-studio dialogue with experts and a diverse studio audience. As key questions arose in the studio discussion, they were presented to the scientific sample viewing the ETM. The dialed-in "votes" were obtained in the TV studio within minutes and were displayed to participants in the studio and viewers at home. Six votes were easily taken during the prime-time, hour-long ETM. This program was viewed by more than 300,000 persons in the Bay Area and just begins to demonstrate the potential for achieving a dramatic increase in the scope of public dialogue and consensus building.

Key Issues Involving Electronic Town Meetings

The power of ETMs raises many issues concerning their possible misuse. These technologies are neither inherently good nor bad — their impact depends upon their design and use. Given their potential for manipulation,

it seems natural that interest groups will seek to exploit these technologies. With our eyes open to dangers of abuse, we must design systems that minimize their risks and amplify our opportunities. Key issues include:

- **Trust in the Public's Judgment:** Historically, public knowledge about nitty-gritty aspects of policy choices often has been fragmentary. Some question the wisdom of bringing an ill-informed public into the decision-making process through ETMs. Yet, it is not the task of citizens to micro-manage government; rather, it is the job of the public to be clear about overall priorities that guide the governing process.

Research indicates that when the public is reasonably well informed about broad public policy issues, its judgment can be trusted. George Gallup Jr.¹ reviewed his organization's experience in polling American public opinion over a half a century and found the collective judgment of citizens to be "extraordinarily sound." Indeed, Gallup discovered that citizens were often ahead of their elected leaders in accepting innovations. Therefore, with the mature use of the mass media as a vehicle of social learning, there is good reason to welcome the citizenry into the governing process.

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- **Direct Versus Representative Democracy:** If the public is more involved in governance through electronically enhanced dialogues, then how direct a role should citizens play? Again, it is not the role of ETMs to enable citizens to inject themselves into the details of policy decisions; instead, it is to enable citizens to build an ongoing consensus regarding the overall direction of public policy. For example, as we run out of cheap oil, we need to know public sentiments on solar power, wind generation, conservation and nuclear power. As citizens redefine their views through electronically supported dialogues, their elected representatives can develop appropriate public policy. Assuming public feedback is advisory, ETMs respect the responsibility of elected leaders to make decisions and the responsibility of citizens to communicate with those who govern.

- **Who Sponsors the ETMs:** Perhaps no factor will have a greater impact on the design, character and implementation of ETMs than who sponsors them. Consider three major possibilities. First, ETMs that are initiated by commercial TV stations will tend to be designed to sell consumers and entertain an audience — not to inform citizens and involve the public in choosing its future. Second, if ETMs are sponsored by a local, state or national government, there will be a natural tendency to use ETMs as a public relations tool rather than as an authentic forum for open dialogue by the community. Third, if ETMs are sponsored by an issue-oriented organization or by an institution representing a particular ethnic, racial or gender

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group, then there will be a tendency to focus narrowly on the concerns of this group. The conclusion seems inescapable that a new social institution is needed to act on behalf of all citizens as the nonpartisan sponsor of Electronic Town Meetings.

Metropolitan areas need to develop nonpartisan and nonprofit "community voice" organizations that perform two key functions: 1) conduct research to determine critical community concerns, and 2) work with television stations to broadcast ETMs. The ETM organization would not promote or advocate any outcome; rather, its goal would be to support community learning, dialogue and consensus building, and let the chips fall where they may.

Even if governments — local, state and national — are not the primary sponsors of ETMs, they will be important in facilitating the development of electronically supported dialogue. First, by simply being aware of the communications revolution and the opportunity this presents for dramatic new levels of citizen participation, governments can welcome rather than resist these innovations. Second, by receiving citizen feedback, a new covenant can be formed that breaks the gridlock of status quo politics. Out of this new partnership can come an exciting process of innovation and experimentation in the public sector.

- **Safeguarding Against Manipulation:** Given the power and reach of televised dialogues, there is the danger that a charismatic leader or influential interest group will monopolize the conversation of democracy and steer public policy in an unfortunate direction. There are various ways to safeguard against such an outcome. ETMs can be designed to insure a continuing variety of voices and views so no one person or group dominates. In addition, the range of issues considered can be so broad that no one person or organization can have an overpowering influence. Views and voices can be deliberately invited in from other metropolitan regions or states so as to provide a moderating influence. Finally, assuming George Gallup Jr. was correct in asserting that the public's judgment can be trusted, then with accurate feedback from a scientific sample of the public, there will be another corrective force. Overall, with foresight, checks and balances can be designed into the ETM process to minimize manipulation.

- **Multiple Forms of Feedback:** So that no one is shut out of the dialogue, responses from the scientific sample need to be supplemented with other types of feedback. First, the random sample can be supplemented with feedback that draws selectively from different age and ethnic groups, geographic areas and so forth. Second, other forms of telephone-based feedback can be included, for example, dial-ins where anyone can call an 800 number and register views that range from simple yes/no answers to sophisticated choices like those used by telemarketing organizations. Third, newspapers can participate by publishing ballots for the public to clip and mail in for tabulation. Fourth, computer-based electronic bulletin boards offer another

approach for obtaining the views of the community. Fifth, community organizations that represent various causes or ethnic, gender or racial groups can be invited to give feedback and provide perspective.

• **Cable TV Versus Broadcast TV:** The scale of the electronically supported dialogues needs to match the scale of the issues being addressed. Otherwise, citizens will feel the dialogues are a meaningless exercise and tune out. Many of the larger metropolitan areas are served by a number of unconnected cable systems. Therefore, it is impractical to use cable TV to support metropolitan-wide dialogues. This is why many current ETM experiments should be developed in cooperation with broadcast TV stations that reach an entire metropolitan area.

Conclusion

With non-partisan “community voice” organizations sponsoring ETMs in major metropolitan areas around the country, a whole new level of citizen dialogue could soon be realized. The conversation of democracy could then be expanded to statewide and nationwide dialogues as changing coalitions of metropolitan organizations call for ETMs on particular issues. The opportunity to revitalize our democracy is genuine, immediate and breathtaking.

A healthy democracy requires the active consent of the governed, not simply their passive acquiescence. Involving citizens through ETMs will not guarantee the right choices will be made, but it will guarantee that citizens feel involved and invested in those choices. Rather than feeling cynical and powerless, citizens will feel engaged and responsible for society and its future. With an involved citizenry, democracy can, in President Clinton’s words, become the “engine of our renewal.” □

Note

¹ Gallup, George Jr. Oct. 21, 1985. “50 Years of American Opinion,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

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