

Birth of an Electronic Nation

A popular Government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or Tragedy, or perhaps both.

—James Madison, letter to W. T. Barry,
August 4, 1832

The Internet has been evolving in a linear fashion, from point to point, since the 1960s, but on October 18, 1994, it took an abrupt turn straight toward the soul of this country.

That day, a St. Paul, Minnesota-based group of Internet enthusiasts calling themselves the Minnesota Electronic Democracy Project posted a message across the Net announcing that they would host the first debate between candidates for the U.S. Senate ever to be held online. Republican Rod Grams and Democrat Ann Wynia, the two major-party candidates for the seat, had agreed to participate; the League of Women Voters of Minnesota had endorsed the event; and the Twin Cities Free-Net and the Minnesota Regional Network, two local public-access Internet service providers, had offered to provide technical support, the message said.

“This debate is an exciting opportunity for all concerned to participate in an unavoidable societal transformation,” G. Scott Aikens, the debate moderator, wrote with a flourish. “All of us involved with the E-Democracy Project are awed at this opportunity to play

a role in a larger process which, if conducted competently, will result in the betterment of the democratic process for all concerned.”

Aikens’s terminology may have been a little overblown, but he assessed the importance of the upcoming event accurately. For all of the technical wizardry the Internet represented, it was still being used as a sort of super-fast teletype, carrying written data from computer to computer in the blink of an eye. Up to that point, the Net didn’t generate news or controversy from within itself, except perhaps on specific issues of computer technology. And it certainly didn’t offer American voters—at least those voters who owned computers—the opportunity to spar online with their elected representatives about matters of their own governance.

The Minnesota E-Democracy debates did that. From Monday, October 1, to Friday, November 4, an estimated 1,000 people “listened” via the Internet as Grams and Wynia argued over crime, federal regulations, and re-establishing the link between Americans and their government. As the candidates made their points, almost 600 members of the virtual audience logged on to an unmoderated discussion list that accompanied the debates to analyze, praise, and criticize their positions.

The importance of the event lay in the audience’s commentary, not the candidates’ statements. For the first time since President Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated his “fireside chats” on the radio in 1933, and John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon argued over the issues in the first televised debate in 1960, American voters engaged in a wholly new medium of communication with the potential to influence not only the course, but the very essence of national politics.

An electronic revolution was transforming the face of American politics. Across the country, the computer-based world known as cyberspace was rapidly joining the ranks of the union hall, the ward meeting, and the campaign volunteer coffee klatsch as the arena in which Americans debated, and acted on, the political issues affecting their lives.

In the 1994 elections, for example, fewer than fifty candidates for any elected office in the United States had e-mail addresses. During Election 2000, the two presidential campaigns alone spent millions of dollars to maintain elaborate sites on the World Wide Web while

thousands of politicians across the country used the Internet for every campaign activity imaginable, from fundraising to organizing rallies.

In 1996, only eleven states offered results from local and state races via the Internet, with updates every fifteen minutes. In November 2000, twenty-eight states, including the presidential “battleground” states of Arizona, California, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio, offered local results in “real time,” as soon as each tally became official. Virginia voters even had the option of downloading the data to their Palm Pilots, as their state became the first in the nation to offer election results via wireless devices.

The Internet is rapidly becoming the vital link in all of our communications, political and otherwise. In 1983, only 8 percent of Americans had access to a computer at home, according to the National Science Foundation. Today 60 percent—or more than 168 million adults in this country—do. The Internet has in fact been accepted by the general public in the United States faster than any other medium. Approximately 35 percent of the U.S. population had a telephone in 1920, but the telephone didn’t reach a 60 percent market penetration for another three decades. Radio took ten years to break the the 60 percent penetration barrier, and television took five years—but the Internet only took two years.

Seen in this light, the first stages of the transformation of politics from off-line to online seem minor compared to the upheavals now taking place. The first online voter information program, launched in October 1994 by the League of Women Voters, attracted only 4,000 users, while a mere 50,000 computer users in California followed the first online tally of state election results the same year.

But these early events are critical because they set a precedent for all the changes to come. Two days after the Republican landslide in the November 1994 election, for example, soon-to-be Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich of Georgia told a Washington audience that he would require that every bill and committee report produced in Congress be filed on computer databases before being released in printed form. The new rules would make that information “available to every citizen in the country at the same moment that it’s available to the highest paid Washington lobbyist,” Gingrich said. “That will change, over time, the entire flow of information and the entire

quality of knowledge in the country, and it will change the way people try to play games with the legislative process.”

Since then, the Internet has figured into every conceivable combination and permutation of the American political dialogue. When Senator Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., went to the Senate floor in June 1995 to protest the imminent passage of strict Net censorship provisions in a telecommunications reform bill, for example, he carried as evidence of popular opposition to the bill a six-inch-thick document that was the first petition signed entirely online. As candidates for the Republican presidential nomination began to lock horns in public a few months later, a mind-boggling array of campaign sites sprouted on the Internet. Many major media outlets, including *Time* magazine, CNN, and the *Washington Post*, launched the first Net sites devoted solely to political coverage.

In August 1996, Democrats opened what was touted as “the most technologically sophisticated convention in history,” complete with an “Internet Alley” that included full-time online “chat rooms,” the controls for five video cameras in the convention hall that could be set to give Web users their favorite views of the proceedings, and an interactive saxophone guaranteed to outplay even President Clinton. Almost exactly two years later, 12 percent of adult Americans—almost twenty million people—went to the Internet to read Independent Counsel Ken Starr’s report on Clinton’s White House peccadilloes. At the time, it was the single highest number of people who had ever used a computer to access a single document, according to CNN.

The online political “firsts” keep coming. In November 1998, Jesse Ventura won the governorship of Minnesota thanks to a primarily Internet-based campaign. Less than a year later, Republican Steve Forbes became the first person to announce his candidacy for President on the Internet before announcing it on television or to the newspapers. Also in 1999, Democratic presidential contender Bill Bradley, the former U.S. Senator from New Jersey, raised more than \$1.18 million via the Internet. Nothing like that had ever been done before. But, then, the story has just begun.

The Internet and Grassroots Organizing

In a three-way race, if only a quarter to a third of the eligible voters in the United States take the time to go to the voting booths, a small, well-organized group of citizens can determine the outcome of an election, Jonathan P. Gill, former director of special projects in the White House's office of media affairs, has said. "If you look at cyberspace as a sort of 'fifty-first state,' and you organize it as effectively as you would organize, say, Tennessee, ward by ward, precinct by precinct—then guess what happens?"

As the media, business, and government expand their activities on the Internet, voters are discovering in turn that computer technology lends speed and geographic range to the traditional mechanisms Americans have long relied on to organize themselves and others at the "grassroots," or individual, level.

A reminder about an upcoming school board meeting takes a few days to get to its target by regular mail, but only a few seconds via electronic mail. A draft of proposed legislation written in San Francisco and meant to be introduced in Congress the following day will reach Washington in less than twenty-four hours if the U.S. Post Office's overnight express service delivers it. If it's routed over the Internet, it reaches Capitol Hill in seconds.

Advocacy groups in Washington and at the local level are constantly refining ways to help their members and other interested voters follow the progress of legislation through computer-based updates. Electronic tools to assist citizens in registering to vote, to analyze their elected officials' position on issues of the day, and to join in building a public consensus on specific legislative and governmental matters are already in place in a number of locations. As Sen. Leahy's document demonstrated, it's even possible these days for thousands of people across the country to "sign" a petition electronically via computer networks.

The Internet's greatest strength, however, is its ability to support simultaneous, interactive communications among many people. Unlike the telephone, which primarily supports one-to-one communications, or radio and television, where information flows in only one direction, from a single source to an audience that can only listen passively, the Net allows information to flow back and forth among millions of sources at practically the same time.

The practice of “forwarding” multiplies the distribution of this information geometrically. For example, one person e-mails a message to the operators of 100 Internet-based mailing lists, which are roughly equivalent to free subscription lists for Net users interested in a particular topic. Each mailing list operator then posts the message to the list, which can range anywhere from ten to many thousands of subscribers. Each subscriber forwards the message to ten friends, who do the same, and so on. The entire forwarding process takes only a matter of hours, or even minutes, thanks to mail-handling software that includes a simple re-addressing component.

The effect can be astounding. In the fall of 1998, for example, MoveOn.org—an e-mail campaign organized by San Francisco-based software designers Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, creators of the “After Dark” screen savers—generated over 250,000 electronic messages to Congress in less than a month. The e-mails, protesting the House Judiciary Committee’s lengthy impeachment hearings conducted in the aftermath of President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky, were compiled and printed into a petition more than 20,000 pages long that was subsequently delivered both to the House just prior to the impeachment vote, and to the White House after the vote was taken. “We are forging a new way to use the Internet—for participation,” Blades and Boyd proclaimed on the MoveOn.org Web site. “After the Internet, democracy will never be the same.”

Even though forwarding became a key online strategy in the 2000 election, the MoveOn.org founders’ prediction was a trifle over-optimistic, as we’ll see. But that doesn’t diminish from the fact that the many-to-many interaction that occurs through computer networks allows political activists to reach out to like-minded members of the public without having to spend millions on four-color pamphlets and television commercials.

“What’s amazing about the Internet is that I don’t have to know everybody’s name to find people who are interested in the same issues I am,” James P. Love, director of Consumer Technology Project, a Washington-based online advocacy group, said. “If I’m sending out a fax or a direct-mail notice [about an issue] I actually have to have a mailing list. I have to buy it or put it together. And it’s often hard to come up with the names.”

“On the Internet, however, people find you, just as you find them,” added Love. “People have a way of organizing themselves into areas of common interest that just doesn’t exist in the more uni-directional media, like the mail or telephone networks.”

The main drawbacks to Net-based organizing have historically been the cost of computers and the time it takes to learn how to use them. Together, these two factors in the past dissuaded some Americans from buying a computer and getting “wired” to the Internet.

But the problem of computer prices has largely been overtaken by the evolution in technology. New PCs now cost as little as \$400 in most places if the buyer takes advantage of discounts offered by online services. Used computers are available through the popular “auction sites” on the Web, like eBay, at prices ranging from many thousands of dollars down to a couple hundred. Some computer industry experts even predict that computers will one day be given away free as part of promotions for new subscribers to high-speed “broadband” services, much like cellular phones are now free under many wireless telephone service plans.

Congress on the Internet

Nowhere is the Internet making faster inroads than in the U.S. Congress.

The 104th Congress (1995–1996), for example, considered fewer than ten bills relating to the Internet. When the 105th Congress closed up shop at the end of 1998, however, it had considered a record 110 bills relating to the Internet, leading one observer to declare 1998 “the year the Internet came of age.” During the 106th Congress, which ended in 2000, 419 bills were introduced that had the word “Internet” in them.

To be sure, Congress has taken its time accepting the onslaught of the Information Age. In June 1993, former Rep. Charlie Rose, D-N.C., then chairman of what used to be the House Administration Committee (now the House Oversight Committee), established the first pilot project to study the efficacy of electronic mail in congres-

sional offices. Only seven members of Congress signed up for the experiment.

Still, e-mail began to catch on. A year later, forty representatives and thirty senators had already acquired Internet addresses, and the same number of members and committees in both houses had requested Internet access, the *Washington Post* reported. Even the most powerful Members of Congress struggled to comprehend the uses of e-mail in those early days. Newly elected Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's "Georgia6@hr.house.gov" address, for example, received almost 13,000 e-mail messages in the first six weeks after Congress returned to work in January 1995. Taken aback by the volume, Gingrich's staff asked the House of Representatives' technical staff to delete the e-mails, according to sources. Eventually cooler heads prevailed and the e-mails were relegated to a backup tape.

Congress came to the Web even more reluctantly. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., built the first Congressional Web site in early 1994, but no one else in the House or the Senate did likewise until a year later. In March 1996, when then-Rep. Rick White, R-Wash., founded the Congressional Internet Caucus, only about one-third of the 535 Members of Congress had Web sites. In the intervening years, the caucus has grown to more than 150 Members, and every office in the House and Senate now has a Web site. (Although Rep. Joel Hefley, R-Colo., the last "Web holdout" in Congress, only agreed to put up a site in January 2000.)

Most Members of Congress still don't like e-mail very much—and, as we'll see, their staffers resist having to deal with it. Also, Congress continues to have a quirky love-hate relationship with the Web: Members love Web sites that broadcast their messages but many are reluctant to participate in discussion forums, chat rooms, electronic discussion lists (known as "listservs"), and all the other sorts of interactive activities at which the Internet excels.

A small but growing number of members of the House and Senate have begun to experiment with tactics to build support online for their own legislation, however. Although Congress' rules clearly bar Members from using public money to lobby, a few Internet-based efforts have remained within reasonable enough limits to pass muster. In 1996, then-Sen. (and now Attorney General) John Ashcroft, R-Mo., became the first Senate member to launch an online petition, in support of a term limits

bill. The petition collected 7,100 signatures in less than two weeks. Since 1999, both House Majority Leader Richard Armey of Texas and House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt of Missouri have maintained Web sites presenting arguments and proposals for opposing tax plans. Both sites urge visitors to sign up for electronic mailing lists that provide regular updates on how the tax measures are faring.

“A lot of people are still in the traditional mindset. They think, ‘We’ve got to use a mailing to get the message across,’” Richard Diamond, Armey’s press secretary and Webmaster for the Congressional site, told the *New York Times*. “What they don’t see is [that] e-mail is more effective, and it doesn’t cost anything, and it reaches a targeted audience.”

If there are any doubts that Congress now “gets it” as far as the Internet itself is concerned, however, House Speaker Dennis Hastert of Illinois put them to rest in a recent “Dear Colleague” letter to House Republicans. “Whether we are speaking in such terminology as ‘digital age,’ ‘information superhighway,’ or the ‘knowledge economy,’” Hastert wrote, “the success of the Internet is real and it is here.”

Looking Ahead

For a medium originally developed as a “command, control, and communication” device for the Pentagon to maintain links between Congress, the White House, and the military in the event of a nuclear war, the Internet has developed a nonhierarchical internal structure. What began, in 1969, as ARPANet—named for the Pentagon’s Advanced Research Projects Agency—at four university sites in California and Utah, has now become a vast web of computer networks linked all over the world. Where access to this network was once limited to computer scientists at prestigious universities, anyone can now send messages, tap into databases, and discuss every topic under the sun. All it takes is a computer, a modem, and a connection through an Internet service provider or a commercial online service such as America Online.

Internet technology is also evolving so rapidly that users of more-advanced computers can transmit data to other users that have the same emotional, see-it-now impact as television. Before the advent of the Web, the Internet could only deliver text from one computer to another. On the Web, however, information travels with sound and full-color pictures or video as well as text. It's as close to television as computers have ever come, but it costs a fraction of the normal fee for air time. "Streaming video," the newest technological wonder to hit the Net, even brings the lights-cameras-action element of motion pictures to the screens of users who have broadband access.

At the same time, the Internet audience—once a group known primarily for its homogeneity—now resembles mainstream America. "Increasingly people without college training, those with modest incomes, and women are joining the ranks of Internet users, who not long ago were largely well educated, affluent men," the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported in 1998. African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian-Americans also now represent significant segments of the Net community, although there is conflicting research about the depth of the "digital divide" in this country.

Net regulars tend to be vitally interested in political issues. Some 45 percent of those Americans who have used the Internet for three years or more go online to learn about candidates and election news, the Pew Research Center reported in early December 2000. While some politicians would characterize the Internet as a bastion of far-left ideology, there is evidence that Americans who go online are no more partisan than other citizens. A 1995 study of technology in the American household by the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press found that computer users are almost identical to those who don't use a computer in terms of party identification and congressional and presidential voting patterns.

Political operatives in Washington are well aware of these statistics. "The guys who use the Web were the swing vote," Tom Gibson, a partner in the Wexler Group, a powerful Washington lobbying firm, said shortly after the 1992 presidential election. "Those are the people you want to reach in 1996, and beyond."

"From 1992 to 1996, we saw an explosion in the percentage of the general population who were on the Internet—so much so that in this election cycle the Internet has reached the same capacity as mail and

radio to reach a very specific demographic of the electorate in a cost-effective and meaningful way. It takes a level of computer and technical literacy to get online, and, because of that, these are the kinds of voters you want to reach with an intelligent and a well-defined message,” said Robert K. Arena, Jr., who was director of Internet strategy for the Dole campaign in 1996, and an advisor to the Republican National Committee on its Internet strategy for the 2000 elections. “As we move beyond 2000, Internet users will represent a more and more active segment of the population, and, as such, politicians can’t afford to bypass reaching out to those voters in the medium they’re most comfortable with.”

As the Net’s politically oriented community grows and changes, it may take the Internet in directions that its original founders never thought possible. For example, Ben Brink, a Republican from Silicon Valley who ran the first wholly online congressional campaign in 1994, promised voters that he would try to pass legislation requiring congressional committee hearings to be conducted via videoconferencing, so that members of Congress could spend more time in their home districts. That idea has yet to be tested, but with the coming of high-speed, high-volume broadband and cable services to the Internet, videoconferences for committee hearings could be commonplace some day. In late February 1996, President Clinton gave the first presidential speech ever broadcast over computer networks in the interactive CUSeeMe format developed by Cornell University. The broadcast was far from watchable—even at fifty-six kilobytes-per-second, the fastest modem speed generally available at the time, the images jerked and the audio quality was spotty—but it signaled a monumental break from the “old” one-to-many communications format in which television dominates. As if to prove that very point, three and one-half years later, in November 1999, Clinton hosted a “virtual town hall meeting” with an estimated 30,000 elected officials and citizens from across the country. Those who watched and listened to the event via the Internet were also encouraged to e-mail questions to the President, who then chose which questions to answer from a list that scrolled up on a nearby computer screen. For the first time Americans had the opportunity to communicate directly and spontaneously with the nation’s Chief Executive without regard to geographic limits.

One of the online community's favorite pastimes is musing over which software program, or "application," will eventually raise the Net out of the world of the privileged and computer savvy into the broad public realm. While politics isn't a software program by any stretch of the imagination, political debate could make the Internet as much a fixture in American households as telephones and television already are.

Politics is already one of the fastest-growing corners of the Web. In early 1996, two years after the Minnesota E-Democracy debates took place, Stardot Consulting of Boulder, Colorado, announced that it was opening its doors as the first political consulting firm to focus entirely on Internet-based campaigns. At the same time, Yahoo!, the popular Internet search engine, listed more than 390 Web sites devoted to political forums, interest groups, organizations, and parties, as well as general information for voters. Four years later, during the 2000 presidential election, Yahoo! listed more than 2,800 such sites. Nowadays, a search of the membership roster for the Communications and Policy Technology Network, a Washington, D.C.-based organization for online political consultants, reveals more than 100 people who specialize in such Internet-centric services as online fundraising, lobbying, and organizing, and "e-mail campaigns."

Unfortunately, some traditional politicians still don't seem to understand this. Congress' presence on the Internet consists, in the main, of flashy home pages that tout Members' accomplishments but do little to gather feedback from constituents. Even those Members brave enough to accept e-mail tend to carry on one-way electronic communication, responding to e-mail queries with paper letters delivered through the regular mail. Most state and local lawmakers' Web sites and e-mail practices are even worse—if the sites and addresses exist at all.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have encouraged at least some members of Congress to take a fresh look at the benefits of electronic communication. On Dec. 6, 2001, Rep. Jim Langevin (D-R.I.), a Congressional newcomer, introduced a bill to require the National Institutes of Standards and Technology to study the feasibility and cost of creating a communications system that would allow Congress to vote from remote locations in the event of another devastating terrorist attack. Langevin's legislation would permit Congress to vote electronically "if circumstances require [it] to convene without being at a single location."

Langevin's bill offers hope for a more enlightened approach in Congress, but those schooled in traditional politics still tend to see the Internet as little more than a big electronic auditorium where millions of people gather to spout off much like high-school kids in a civics class—but nonetheless have little actual impact on the crafting of policies that govern them. This vision simply rationalizes the use of old messages in a new medium. "I'll give you several proposals and you tell me which one you like the best. I'm here to listen," the lawmaker says to the public in the traditional scheme. The problem is that the proposals have already been crafted in some private meeting, where the public could attend only through the representation of pricey lobbyists.

Better that the Internet's power be put to work building consensus via information passed back and forth between citizens at times that are convenient for them. "The less that electronic democracy proposals are focused upon real-time applications—watching a TV show and pushing some buttons—the more likely it is that what is proposed will take advantage of one of the key contributions interactivity is able to make," former White House staffer David A. Lytel wrote in *Media Regimes and Political Communication: Democracy and Interactive Media in France*. "The promise of a new interactive regime lies in harnessing the power of the activists to educate and motivate their fellow citizens, rather than focusing their resources upon influencing legislators."

More and more Internet-savvy Americans are "educating and motivating" their fellow citizens these days on every political issue under the sun. If you've got an issue that you think lawmakers should address, you can do the same.

