

The Virtual Town Hall

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INTRODUCTION

A key part of the appeal of interactive communications technology (ICT) has been its huge potential to facilitate citizen access to and participation in government and the political process, particularly since the advent of the World Wide Web (WWW) in the early 1990s. The ability of citizens to initiate direct contact with government individually and become civically engaged can be enhanced by telecommunications, according to e-democracy proponents (see Barber, 1984, 2003; Becker & Slaton, 2000; Cleveland, 1985; Clift, 2004; Davis, Elin, & Reeher, 2002; Nye, 1998). We refer to this use of ICT to enhance democracy as the virtual town hall (VTH). When we use the term “virtual town hall,” we refer not only to specific current or prior use of ICT as a site for interactive public discourse but also to the full range of potential civic discourses that might be mediated through and enhanced by ICT (e.g., electronic town meetings, citizen juries, e-panels, and online polling, to name just a few). In short, the VTH concept encompasses all the ways in which contemporary and future interactive technologies can potentially create a “virtual public sphere,” returning to “mass culture” some of the interactive and direct discourse practices of the traditional, local civic environment. We believe that such technologies have the potential, when developed and implemented properly, to enhance participatory government in any areas where broadband access can be achieved. Likewise, this potential should encourage us to pursue the goal of increasing access to ICT for people everywhere, regarding it as a fundamental public service, like a basic utility, that constitutes a major factor in maintaining the quality of life. Governments in the United States and elsewhere have created a strong presence on the WWW since the mid- to late-1990s. However, government Web sites typically emphasize what has been called a “services first, democracy later approach,” especially in the United States (Clift, 2003). The use of ICT to enhance citizen engagement with government and politics is often overlooked, downplayed, or ignored by governments in favor of the technology’s capacity to help facilitate the delivery of public services.

Technology provides numerous opportunities for a more open, democratic process of governance and increased political participation. In theory, ICT makes this possible for the following reasons identified by Abramson, Atherton, and Orren (1988): the huge volume of information that can be exchanged; the ability to exchange this information without being constrained by time and space; the unprecedented control users have over what messages are received and when; the decentralization of information production and control; and the interactive nature of information exchange. Thus, the VTH can bring into being an online version of the public sphere, empowering ordinary citizens to strengthen their communities and democratic institutions (Croff & Casaregola, 1998). The VTH uses ICT to encourage public discussion and deliberation over the proper ends of government and the means to achieve those ends. We contend the VTH can serve as a means to strengthen civil society. As noted by Putnam and others, civil society is essential to democracy. Civil society helps inculcate the core values and norms associated with democratic government. Indeed, according to Alexis de Tocqueville, civil society is what makes democratic government possible. Whether the potential of the VTH to strengthen civil society is fulfilled, however, depends on the current choices made by governments and other social institutions regarding issues of citizen access to ICT and the role of this technology in democratic governance.

BACKGROUND: THE VIRTUAL TOWN HALL, E-DEMOCRACY, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In general, governments’ online efforts are well meaning and often effective in their own way, however, many fall short of facilitating genuine civic engagement by citizens. Fortunately, a great deal of effort has been exerted by grassroots, non-governmental organizations in creating citizen forums, which has helped fill the gap in online civic engagement. Public deliberation and decision-making is being facilitated by the use of ICT, whether the forums are

“officially” sponsored or not. The VTH is a critical element in the establishment of electronic democracy (e-democracy). According to social activist, Steven Clift (2004), “e-democracy represents the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors (government officials, the media, political organizations, citizens/voters) within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage” (p. 38). The advent of e-democracy has been touted since the early years of the personal computer revolution when, for example, one observer noted, “very large numbers of people empowered by knowledge ... assert the right or feel the obligation to make policy” (Cleveland, 1985, p. 188). As more and more people respond to world events by participating, organizing, and deliberating online, the potential for using ICT to shape public policy is becoming more of a reality. Indeed, this is occurring on a global scale as civic groups and activists around the world seek to influence international policy-making via telecommunications (O’Brien, 2002). Fortunately, the experience in several countries (e.g., Canada, UK, and Australia) provides a source of optimism regarding technology’s potential to strengthen democratic institutions and processes. Over time, however, elected leaders in all countries must use ICT to engage the public or larger numbers of people will feel alienated from government and view the political process as unresponsive to their needs.

The nexus of civil society, e-democracy, and e-government has been explored by authors such as Robert Putnam (2000) and Benjamin Barber (1984, 2003). For example, Putnam, although skeptical of the more grandiose claims of e-democracy proponents, concedes that telecommunications constitutes the most important trend toward strengthening civic engagement (p. 166). According to Barber (2003), vigorous public discussion and debate, which he refers to as “strong democratic talk,” constitutes the very core of strong democratic communities. Advances in technology, Barber argues, provide the means for reducing the opportunity costs of citizen participation in democratic forums. Prior to the telecommunications revolution, participation was constrained for many citizens because of the costs incurred in taking time away from working, socializing with friends and families, or being engaged in leisure activities.

VIRTUAL TOWN HALLS: A LITERATURE SURVEY

The scholarly literature suggests that new media technologies, particularly those found on the WWW, can be used to build civil society (Beamish, 1995; Cisler, 1993;

Cropf & Casaregola, 1998; Fountain, 2001; Hale, Musso, & Weare, 1999; Levine, 2000; O’Brien, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Schuler, 1996). For example, communities using ICT can help the social integration of marginalized individuals by improving their access to other marginalized groups like themselves (Law & Keltner, 1995). Based on interviews with disabled or older users of community networks, the authors found that the marginalized users’ social isolation was significantly reduced by their being able to communicate electronically with others facing similar challenges. Increasing and augmenting information sharing among people is an important foundation of social capital. By providing increased opportunities for communication among members of a community or across communities, one also increases the overall level of social trust, which can eventually be translated into collective action directed towards achieving common social goals (Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001). This increased action can be directed toward achieving community goals and contributes significantly to an improvement in the community’s overall quality of life. In a study of a community technology center, the authors found that building social capital was the critical ingredient in promoting positive change in the community (Alkalimat & Williams, 2001).

Technology can aid in creating connections between different communities, according to a study examining a series of community-based Web exhibits of the experiences of different ethnic groups in the American Southwest (Glogoff, 2001). This work reinforces the point made earlier that information sharing via ICT can help build social capital. According to the writer, the Web exhibits bring together

[P]eople who self-identify with its content and seek out some degree of membership. Such behavior is consistent with the view that an essential element of building a climate of trust involves feeling secure in revealing vulnerable parts of ourselves to others. When people share intimate details of their lives with a virtual stranger, it affirms that an implicit context of trust has been established.

The author’s personal communications with exhibit visitors indicates that they believed the exhibit offered them a safe environment within which to open themselves up to others.

A recent article examines the effects on social capital of a resident-maintained “networked community” in Melbourne, Australia (Meredyth, Hopkins, Ewing, & Thomas, 2002). The Reach for the Clouds project is based in a low-income, ethnically diverse high-rise public housing development. The goal of the project, according to its sponsors, is to help residents to help themselves through

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