

Join the Evolution – Ten Practical Online Steps for Government Support of Democracy

Long Version

Draft as prepared for a U.S. government e-government newsletter. This was a long draft, before being shortened down to a 1000 word version for publication. This version contains examples and more room for some sass. For the short version, see: <http://publicus.net/articles.html>

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Does e-government have anything to do with democracy and citizen participation?

Let's get straight to the point - not yet.

Should it? Yes.

If you believe in government of, for, and by the people, then government - both representative and administrative should be leading a charge into the increasingly and fundamentally interactive web.

Information access, considered the safe starting point for government accountability online now mostly presents the public a daunting needle in a huge haystack. So not only are governments excluding themselves from the increasingly interactive public lives of citizens, the fundamental information access system is so complicated that the valuable and substantive information that government produces is often ignored in our increasingly online lives. Government and the democratic processes designed to promote sustained peace and stability among competing and often conflicting narrow interests in society cannot remain offline or the consequences will be devastating to our communities and nation.

A bit of context; I coordinated e-government for the State of Minnesota in its early days. I designed our first portal which launched in 1995. As a "citizen" I independently started E-Democracy.Org which created the world's first election information and discussion website in 1994. I was a "democracy guy" opening up government from the inside – as I say, "government by day, citizen by night."

When "services first, democracy later" enveloped most e-government projects, I skedaddled in late 1997. Since then, I've spoken and consulted across 26 countries on "e-democracy," interacting primarily with leading governments interested in engaging citizens online.

Don't get me wrong; with democracy in the broadest sense, America is number one with "e-politics" online. We excel at raising money online with e-campaigning and making noise through e-advocacy. For democratic representative governance, that actually compounds the problem. In no country, do people expect the web to be as interactive as it can be than in the U.S., yet our governments from the local level on up have a limited "e-listening" infrastructure and no infrastructure for two-way public interactivity that brings people into legitimate democratic

processes. Current options for online input provide one-way passive information access with comment submissions that go into the digital equivalent of an inaccessible black box.

A country that cannot listen to and interact with its citizens "anywhere, any time" in their preferred medium will not be able to accommodate the will of the people. As red-blue partisan conflicts online among the political class intensify, new forms of democratic participation, including online spaces and extensions of off-line consultative and deliberative processes, that are part of authoritative representative democracy, must be built. If not, our governments will no longer reflect the general consensus of today's society. Further, the lack of real and effective online access to governance between elections will substantially increase cynicism about and distrust in government.

To illustrate this widening democratic divide, note the 2008 campaign where over a dozen presidential candidates are innovating online. They are shaking hands at the "digital parades" of Facebook and YouTube. They are going to the people where they are online, not expecting folks to just come their campaign websites.

What will our citizens expect when this highly interactive election season is over? One-way governance? I doubt it. We need to prepare ourselves now for a public that demands a more participatory representative democracy.

Let me add that campaigns are not using the digital divide as an excuse to delay putting a participatory infrastructure in place and neither should government. The digital divide is an important issue, but not a reason to exclude people with often difficult to access time and place bound forms of participation by denying them online convenience. However that said, most traditional offline participation methods must be complemented and not replaced with Internet-only options.

Let's get practical.

Here are the ten things I would do in government to help rescue our democracy in the information age. These are things that government organizations at every level can do. (Similar lists for citizens, the media, and political interest groups should also be generated. Government needs to do its part within the context of these major democratic actors.)

1. Timely, personalized access to information that matters.

Government decision-making information is not functionally public or relevant if people cannot act on it when it still matters. Give people tools like personalized e-mail alerts based on keywords, location, etc. and eliminate the "nobody told me" backlash government often receives due to poor public outreach.

Examples:

- St. Paul, Minnesota allows you to choose from over 400 "what's new" e-mail updates on documents that change periodically.
- The Province of Alberta, Canada provides a comprehensive and uniform system for web feeds (RSS) on news releases across their government.

For web links to examples, see the online version of this article from: <http://dowire.org/evolution>

2. Help elected officials receive and sort, the better understand and respond to e-mail.

The number one complaint I hear from elected officials around the world is about e-mail. Most want to respond effectively, but simply aren't being provided the tools they need. If there ever was an opportunity for open source collaboration among governments, this is it.

In general, our representatives and representative institutions must start to invest in the online infrastructure they need to connect directly with the public they represent. This includes "governance" versions of online innovations deployed to gain power in e-campaigning to competing online for democratic relevancy with the relative technology-rich executive branch and major media online

Example:

- Menlo Park, California's Direct Connect service demonstrates how to help citizens direct their mostly service-related queries. If those queries are processed effectively, the policy related queries can be noticed and receive more direct attention.

3. Dedicate at least 10 percent of new e-government developments budgets to democracy.

You might be thinking, "What? Ten percent. But we are about providing service efficiency. Let's be honest engaging the public is inefficient."

Effective democracy is about introducing the optimal level of inefficiency required to make the best public choices. What good is it if government simply automates what it does wrong or expends their limited resources to streamline a service no longer in high demand?

By democracy, let's take us a wide definition starting with public input. In a e-service initiative, say online licensing, the 10 percent should start with citizen focus groups to guide the design of the service, usability testing and studies to generate user input and accountability, and like many e-commerce sites do, gather feedback via post transaction user surveys. All this mildly two-way data should be used as a service quality dashboard for managers and front-line employees alike.

If the e-government investment is a new content management system mostly for information access, then use the 10 percent to add personalization, survey input features and democratized navigation (those nifty menus that show you the top ten viewed articles that day or week).

4. Announce all government public meetings on the Internet in a uniform manner.

All public meeting notices, agendas, handouts, and digital recordings (live webcasts, podcasts, etc.) must be online. The system should be standards based and tie state-by-state systems into a national network covering federal, state, and local government public meetings. This is the only way for people to ask to be pro-actively notified of all government public meetings, from a local land use commission to a state forestry department to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, within a certain geographic area addressing specific topics or keywords that interest them.

Example:

- The Minnesota Legislature provides a dizzying array of all public information components tied to legislative hearings. From schedules and audio podcast files to amendments as they are proposed on the floor, the Internet is a tool for deep participation. Leading state legislative bodies are a model to extend to other government organizations.

5. Allow citizens to look-up *all* of their elected officials from the very local to national in one search across many sites.

Along with the ability to look-up all public meetings, Americans should have the right to easily determine who all the elected and appointed officials are who represent them currently and how to contact them effectively. Before elected and appointed officials assume office, every government unit should be required to submit contact information for those officials into a "National Representative Democracy Database". State and local government involvement in the creation of standards and fields for such a public domain database will be essential. Inter-governmental associations may resist this idea because many produce detailed directories sold to lobbyists and others. It will be up to them to innovate with their directories by adding more value to maintain their market.

Example:

- The Minnesota House also provides a member directory and online toolkit that demonstrates the power of a uniform set of sophisticated tools for all elected officials in an assembly. City council members across the country must demand the tools to best represent their constituents and not be relegated to just a picture and short biography.

6. Host online public hearings and dialogues (or "e-consultations" as they are known outside the U.S.)

As in-person public meetings begin to incorporate live online features - from instant handout access to testifying via Skype with a webcam - more deliberate one day to one month online exchanges seeking to improve the outcomes of the decision-making process need to be envisioned. If your government agency hosts five public hearings across the country or your state, host the sixth hearing online and improve the format in the process. Another model to consider is an extension of public testimony at Congressional and other committee hearings where for 24 hours after the live event, the public - including experts - are invited to testify via text, video and audio with viewer/reader rating system in place to recommend the most valuable or noteworthy testimony received. In twenty years, governments not holding hearings online will be considered the unresponsive minority.

Further, government funding for University or civil society-hosted online dialogues and deliberations would be highly strategic. Creating value-added interactive experiences that get beyond online political flame fests are essential and can be done. While detailed legal advice on how to promote decorum online within the bounds of the first amendment for governments would help open up two-way spaces, more controversial issues often benefit from a partner serving as a neutral host who can strongly promote real names and civility.

Government officials often complain to me about misinformation online as a reason they avoid engaging online. If only someone would correct the record they suggest. Let me hold up a mirror. Policies that empower civil servants to "inform" the public professionally across other interactive sites from a MySpace conversation to a local community forum or blog are essential. Government must correct the record in every medium, particularly as the Internet reaches more and more people.

Examples:

- Get Involved, the democracy portal of the State of Queensland, offers an innovative Consult Queensland survey and consultation platform. As the public and targeted constituent groups read specific sections of a report they are asked to answer various survey questions. As they answer, they are given the choice to share their opened ended comments immediately via the site. This along with instant public access to the numeric percentage results compiled in real-time thus far on multiple choice questions creates a structured conversation. Structure in, value out. This counters the "black box" effect of public comments that are legally public but functionally private. We need citizens to better appreciate the views of other interests in society. This often builds respect for the complexity of choices before government as it deals with competing priorities.
- E-consultation guidance is being generated across the Commonwealth. The concept and term "e-consultation" doesn't really exist in the United States. A version of the term should - hence my use of the term online public hearings or dialogues. For extensive advice consult the following resources:
 - Canada – See "Resources and Publications" from the Online Consultation Centre of Expertise, Public Works and Government Services Canada
 - UK – Review numerous guides on "eConsultations and eSurveys" from the International Centre for Excellence in Local E-Democracy (formerly known as the UK Local E-Democracy National Project). Also consult the Hansard Society's Digital Dialogues reports on central government experience with e-consultation.
 - Bristol, UK – Along with their AskBristol.Org "e-panel" experience, numerous e-democracy features are profiled in the 2007 report titled, "eDemocracy in Bristol."
 - Australia – Local Council e-Consultation Guide written by representatives of Darebin City Council and Deakin University.

7. Embrace the rule of law by mandating the most democratically empowering online services and rights across the whole of government.

From my extensive travels and research, I estimate that 90 percent of the democratic innovations online hosted by governments that really share power are based on a political tradition or law that existed before the Internet arrived.

Technology itself is not forcing real institutional democratic change. Governments remain reactive to external changes and are therefore missing an opportunity to build societal expectations while the online medium remains fluid. We need more people to expect that "of course I can participate in my government and make a difference in my local community online."

If we want all citizens to benefit universally from a more wired democracy, then now is the time to update our legal requirements and fund core online democracy services. I am working up an outline for a "Minnesota Digital Democracy Act" that might be replicated in other states and nationally. At a minimum I'll propose that we:

- Update open meeting laws to require that in addition to newspaper publication, all meetings must be announced on the Internet. By 2010 all public meetings at every level must be digitally recorded (audio and/or video) with online access provided. Open meeting laws would also clearly state that fully public online gatherings that include a

quorum of voting officials are legal while private or inaccessible two-way group communication among a majority of voting members about pending business is not.

- Require that all elected and appointed officials are provided e-mail accounts to use for any and all public business (smart governments will toss in universal inbox systems with voicemail and e-mail response tools as well). Use of private e-mail accounts (or instant or text messaging) to avoid public information disclosure laws should be a crime. Laws should further ensure that any legally public reports, memorandum, e-mail sent by civil servants to a majority of voting officials regarding a pending vote be publicly disclosed automatically online by default at the same time they are sent to committee/task force members. In the past, many government bodies kept binders of such civil servant print memos – moving taxpayer supported councils, task forces, etc. online must not be allowed to make the process functionally less accessible and therefore less legitimate.
- Like the new federal law that established FederalSpending.Gov, establish real-time and deep access to government program and spending information (not just proposed budgets) at the state and local level. Poland requires standardized online spending reports from local government in their Freedom of Information Act, why can't we. Transparency will promote greater government efficiency and accountability.
- Mandate that all public ethics filings and campaign finance data be disclosed electronically on the Internet and not stuck in some filing cabinet or offline computer. If we collected it to promote government accountability, we must disclose it automatically online. Legally public ethics information that is not online must soon be viewed as prehistoric.
- And more. Send me your ideas: clift@publicus.net

Ultimately, I've come to expect that if online access is viewed as an inconvenience or a threat to those in power, they won't adopt it unilaterally. Citizens must express a real demand for representative "e-democracy" in the political process or they will not experience effective democracy in the information age. As this happens, candidates will begin to make reform promises during elections and overtime deliver political results in office.

8. Dissemination - Access to Raw Data from Decision-Making Information Systems

Let's explode decision-making data, like Congressional information and rulemaking related content, into bits via XML and open standards. This will allow third-party services to move from "online scraping" toward advanced and useful presentation of discombobulated parts. What?

In other words, let's make it easy to re-use public government data from many sources and create views and searches that provide insight, understanding, and accountability. Think "Web 2.0" interactivity built on top of government data by those outside of government.

Unless budgeted for directly or mandated by law, government agencies rarely add online features beyond those they feel they need for their core purposes. Unless a system, say for public analysis of state agency spending (I want an e-alert for furniture purchases the last month of each fiscal year) is funded, agencies will not reallocate resources from another program to provide such accountability tools.

Examples:

- In the UK, mySociety.Org's TheyWorkforYou.com scrapes data from the UK Parliament and presents one of the most dynamic and useful windows into the legislative process available. It allows you to set personalized e-mail alerts so you can be notified when certain phrases are said or be updated on formally noted actions – from speeches to votes - by your Member of Parliament.
- OpenCongress.Org and GovTrack.US are two similar projects in the United States. The new Sunlight Foundation is funding a number of activities in this area including The Open House Project. They have engaged a number of “citizens” with extensive Web 2.0 experience who are developing a policy and technical roadmap for Congress, and likely parts of government to follow in this area.
- At the local level, ChicagoCrime.Org demonstrates how the official crime blotter can be combined using the “API” (application programming interface) for Google Maps. Developers of this site are now working on Everyblock.com with funding from the Knight Foundation to aggregate “an unprecedented depth of local news and information in select cities [much of it government data].”

9. Fund Open Source Sharing Internationally Across E-Government

Sharing and supporting open source software takes resources. E-democracy tools are an ideal starting point within the e-government family. Unlike service transactions, where cost savings are often used to justify funding, with e-democracy such claims do not align with goal of increasing citizen engagement and improved government decision-making. Therefore, open source initiatives which reduce technology costs and build systems for use by multiple governments make the most sense with the democracy services niche.

Getting the ball rolling is the difficult part. No one government can justify subsidizing the technology infrastructure of another peer government. Like the UK and Italian governments, national funding can support local government pilots and tool sharing. We need to take their leadership a step further and imagine what ten national governments could accomplish by jointly investing one million dollars a year for ten years in an open source specification development and code sharing e-government initiative perhaps in partnership with major Universities in each country. If Google can have their Summer of Code competition, why not tap a similar vein to produce code that meets public challenges head on.

Strategically, I recommend building government and democracy applications using open source content management systems with demonstrated momentum and large development communities (like Plone, Drupal, etc.) rather than starting from scratch with government-specific tools unlikely to foster contributions from other developers. Key will be efforts to place modules and customizations out for community use. Government and its vendors must contribute code back for the wheels of reciprocal value to start turning.

Here are a few tools/modules I'd like to see developed starting with a highly open specification development stage followed by competition among various open source communities to deliver. Ideally the feature set would spread across multiple platforms. In addition to the e-mail response system collaboration mentioned earlier, additional ideas include:

- **Public Meeting** - A personalized public meeting notifier system based on keywords and geographic relevancy with agendas, handouts, etc. The system could overtime evolve into a mini-legislative information system for the thousands of city councils and county boards with little more than a file server for decision-making documents.

- **Democaster** - A low cost webcasting system starting with audio, webcam images or video, integrated podcasts (recorded audio), meeting agenda and document links, and the ability to ask a text question remotely. I coordinated development of a working prototype for the British Government in 2005-6 using a number of open source tools that simply required an Internet connection, a laptop, and a microphone to reach the world, but more importantly people in a local community live and on-demand. Moving such a tool into full production along with adding the ability to webcast via a simple office speaker phone through IP telephony on the audio input side is proposed. This would make basic webcasting so inexpensive that public meetings in even the smallest villages not audio webcast will be the exception.
- **Engagement** - A platform for different types of online hearings, surveys, consultations, dialogues, and deliberations. Such systems may also be used to enable stakeholder participation in the implementation of public policy. E-Democracy.Org, the non-profit I lead, uses the open source GroupServer tool from New Zealand in this space.
- **Voter Guide** – Early e-voting hype obscured the real value of the Internet in election – promoting informed voting. Developing an open source voter guide module for the most popular content management systems used by government, the media, and non-partisan voter education non-profits would enable more and better voter guides around the world.

10. Local Up - Building local democracy online.

To build e-participation momentum, citizens need to experience results they can see and touch. National politics is difficult to influence in any medium. By investing in transferable local models and tools, more people will use the Internet as a tool to strength their communities, protect and enrich their families and neighborhoods, and be heard in a meaningful way. Starting with community by community measurement of information access and participation related online service and content indicators, we can create momentum for a "Democracy Tune-up." This same tune-up concept should applied at the state and federal level as well.

Example:

- E-Democracy.Org works locally with Issues Forums - a 24x7 online town hall meeting with real names and facilitation and rules for civility. These and other two-way online spaces leverage online government information, online news, and the emerging "speaker's corner" we see with local blogs. Like the City of Roseville, Minnesota, governments (and others) should kick-start local non-partisan e-democracy efforts with small amounts of funding. While many individual owned and run community blogs are extremely positive, I fear many communities will be stuck with a bitter local online NIMBY climate where typically anonymous reader comments never get beyond the modern version of protesters at the gates with pitchforks and torches. In England, Issues Forums pilots as well as dozens of other local e-democracy projects were funded by the then UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in recent years.

Conclusion

Ultimately, an investment in e-democracy/e-participation by government needs to solve identified problems and meet indicators of success.

In the early days, folks thought the Internet was inherently democratic. Parts of it are, but that mistaken sense of technological determinism has not carried over to make constitutional and legally-ground representative processes more open and responsive. Today, "politics as usual" now armed online may actually be making things worse. Civically conceived e-participation efforts must counter such negative trends rather than be viewed as an extra option. Preservation of democratic rights and processes is an important outcome.

I've experienced better and stronger democracy online. Everyone should. Beyond, holding democratic ground, positive outcomes include better policy decisions, generation of new and cost-effective ideas, generating input beyond the usual suspects, a more informed citizenry, in-depth engagement with specific constituencies, incremental restoration of trust, and my ultimate goal citizens empowered to meet the public challenges closest to them directly in everyday life.

Join the Evolution

*To network directly with other e-participation leaders I invite you to join the evolution with your peers from around the world as a member of the **Online Consultation and E-Participation** online community of practice as part of the Democracies Online – DoWire.Org blog, wiki, and online groups initiative that I lead: <http://groups.dowire.org/groups/consult>
Many of the examples mentioned are also highlighted in the Global E-Democracy Trends presentations available from: <http://publicus.net/speaker.html>*