

Will democracy be enhanced by the new technology, or are we all doomed?

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SHORTLY AFTER Barack Obama became the first US President to build his campaign around online social media, his new administration held an online ‘brainstorming’ session, seeking ideas for making government ‘more transparent, participatory and collaborative’. Participants in the online brainstorming felt unconstrained by these terms and pursued their own pet ideas and/or voted others’ ideas up or down a ladder of popularity.

With a rerun of the Great Depression in the offing, what was uppermost in the public mind? Legalising marijuana topped the pops on the brainstorming site, followed by releasing Barack Obama’s birth certificate.

Welcome to vox pop democracy. The tendency is intensifying, with shock jocks spreading a culture of narcissistic entitlement and the internet hosting ideological echo chambers where people nurse their resentment and hostilities to their ideological opponents.

In the United States, the conjunction of big money from the top and the bottom-up power of the internet is making things worse. In 2000, leading Republican candidates for President paid lip service to the scientific consensus on global

warming. This year, the Tea Party has marginalised such views and the remaining candidates wear their intransigence on action against climate change as a badge of honour.

In much discussion of the ills of our democracy, ‘we the people’ figure as innocent victims of the depredations of others: of the sensationalism of the media, of the duplicity of our politicians. But the media does not run the sensationalist, empty, narcissistic rubbish it presents and politicians don’t engage in the dark arts of spin and character assassination because they are a lower form of life. They do it because our decisions mean that it works. We buy the papers. We voted for John Howard in 2004, though by then we knew of his lies about children overboard. We voted for Paul Keating in 1993 because he demonised the GST, the same policy he described as an economic necessity a few years earlier.

This self-indulgence about ‘we the people’ can lead to magical thinking. In our republican debate, how often have you heard someone say that they don’t want our politicians to appoint our head of state because we want something better than a typical politician? They conclude that ‘we the people’ should keep it in our own hands by electing them ourselves.

Yet on the slightest reflection it is clear that popular elections are the very way we get politicians. Note how politicians are cast as the villains but we, whose votes select them, remain unsullied. We are present at the scene of the crime yet we are invisible.

Much enthusiasm for the internet’s capacity to transform politics is similarly magical in its thinking and similarly self-indulgent. As with the glamorous assistant disappearing once inside the magician’s cabinet, only to miraculously reappear moments later, here ‘we the people’ go missing when the hunt is on for the culprit responsible for the toxic state of our political culture, only to emerge as the deliverer from it moments later. It is only this disappearing act that allows us to imagine that we

might be made whole again if only ‘we the people’ can take politics back, unmediated via the internet.

What we are seeing here is the naiveté of what Joseph Schumpeter called the ‘classical doctrine of democracy’. Following 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this holds that the will of the people coincides with the public good, and that the less mediated that public will is, the more democratic and so beneficial government will be.

For Schumpeter this is hopelessly naive. Politics is necessarily a struggle for power between people and perspectives. It also requires expertise and the command of detail. The internet really does give us the technology to take government fully to the people. Each night on returning home we could vote online on all the legislative minutiae that today occupies our parliamentary representatives. Just spelling it out dispels the allure.

Schumpeter argues that modern democracy is largely impossible without a strong elite class dedicated to public service. For Schumpeter, elites, which is to say leaders, are inevitable for any tolerably complex organisation to function efficiently. And when you think about it, that fits the bill in schools, firms, hospitals, and even local tennis clubs.

Schumpeter would probably concede that the political elite tends to take advantage of its position in unfair ways. But the touchstone of a democracy is that ‘we the people’ get to shape our elites because factions of the elite compete for the consent of the governed.

Without this process ‘the will of the people’ is inchoate. In the same way one might say that one has not really had a thought until one has properly articulated it, it is through electoral contest that the polity articulates its own political values and lives its own democratic political life.

Yet, as Schumpeter pointed out, thinking effectively about political questions requires abstract thought and is far removed from the concrete details of our life. In that regard, Schumpeter

was an early worrier about magical thinking in democratic politics. As early as the 1940s he was prescient about the similarity between commercial advertising and political campaigning. He observes:

We find the same attempts to contact the subconscious, the same technique of creating favourable and unfavourable associations which are the more effective the less rational they are, the same evasions and the same trick of producing opinion by reiterated assertion that is successful precisely to the extent to which it avoids rational argument and the danger of awakening the critical faculties of the people.

Sound familiar?

While it is fashionable to look to the radical openness of projects like Wikipedia and open source software for inspiration about our politics, those projects offer some other food for thought. For each online project requires leadership. That leadership must be inclusive enough to encourage volunteers. But there are endless design questions about how that's best done. And here a dominant leadership style is that of the BDFL, or for those not in the know, the Benevolent Dictator for Life.

Jimmy Wales was a BDFL for years after his founding of Wikipedia and retains enormous power. Here's how Linux's leader Linus Torvalds defended his choice of the penguin as Linux's mascot: 'If you still don't like it, that's okay; that's why I'm boss. I simply know better than you do.'

These comments were made in the context of the ability of anyone, anywhere 'to fork the project', that is, to take Linux's entire code base and distribute a new version of the software reflecting their wishes. Alas, this remarkable new turn is only possible in the digital world which transcends scarcity.

The ultimate task of politics, its point, is to solve the *e pluribus unum* problem. Out of the vast diversity of views in the community it must converge on some unitary will. Our politics decide whether we invade Iraq or not, whether and by

how much we will cut taxes or increase pensions and so on. And with or without the internet, converging towards these decisions remains as problematic as ever.

Even Ancient Athenian democracy ran on great leadership, but its participatory nature generated chaos. And that was with fewer citizens than Albany/Woodstock. Rather than swoon at the chimera of direct democracy unencumbered by institutions and elites, one lesson from the internet is that the wishes of the electorate cannot be properly aggregated into a unitary authority, and they cannot be articulated without leadership; that is to say, without elites.

The question then becomes the extent to which we can get the elites we need. Alas, I have no panaceas to offer. The problem of how we govern ourselves is an ancient and tragic part of the human condition. But here are some tentative suggestions.

Arguably, our most radically democratic institution is the jury. Yet it was nurtured within the deeply elitist traditions of the legal system to be largely insulated from the depredations of populism or vox pop democracy. As it sits through the case, each jury is trained as a special-purpose cognitive elite. Though it represents the populace from which it is selected, it has deliberated long and hard on the case and the community puts great trust in its judgment.

The consensus conference is a similar institution in politics. Here, a small, jury-sized, randomly selected group deliberates at length on some policy issue including, as with a jury, hearing evidence from professional experts and advocates from various sides. Typically, the body has no legislative or executive power. Nevertheless, it is hoped that its conclusions are of note to other citizens and their political representatives.

Legislators in the US state of Oregon were concerned at the scope for the manipulation of citizens' initiated referendums by wealthy interests. So, they recently required such referendums

to be accompanied by citizens' juries, to draft advice to voters casting their ballot.

This could be extended further to a standing house of Parliament that was broadly representative of regions, gender, race and so on, but otherwise chosen at random from the community. Like the jury, this would provide a means of democratic deliberation away from the alarms and excursions of vox pop democracy. We could see what a random group of Australians, having taken the time to brief themselves, thought of the issues passing through Parliament.

This would also broaden our pool of politicians by assisting talent spotting and promotion in a political world that is otherwise collapsing into careerism. Such a body would not displace the process by which we vote for the government of our choice, though to give the new body some ability to insist it be listened to, it could have the power to delay bills as the UK House of Lords enjoys today.

In all this, the internet could support citizens' juries or chambers by facilitating participation and deliberation at much lower cost and greater convenience.

In conclusion, the internet is working miracles. It is opening our world to an explosion of talent, creativity and diversity. But where Wikipedia unleashes the power of the crowd to help us answer questions about what is the case, politics is our necessarily imperfect way of solving a vastly more difficult question. The task of politics is to build some unified will about what ought to be, from the vast diversity of interests and perspectives within the community.

Here, there are no miracles in sight. Indeed, it is hard to imagine them emerging this side of the grave. Juvenal's question: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (Who will guard the guardians) remains as ever a reminder of our fallen state and a spur to continue our efforts to build a better world.