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Beyond Vox Pop Democracy: Democratic Deliberation and Leadership in the Age of the Internet

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Collectives act almost exclusively by accepting leadership — this is the dominant mechanism of practically any collective action which is more than a reflex.

Joseph Schumpeter, 1943[1]

E pluribus unum

The great seal of the United States, 1782

I

In 1981 a young political junkie with progressive sympathies, Joe Trippi, joined the campaign to make Tom Bradley governor of California, and so the first black governor in US history. An alumnus of San Jose University, Trippi had taken in the 'vibe' of the incipient Silicon Valley. He suggested using a computer to help track voters and manage the campaign. Costing $17,000 with 1.5 megabytes of memory, it may have been the first computer used for political campaigning. The newfound efficiency of the campaign brought the campaign face to face with the 'bittersweet' trade-offs between ends and means that are the daily bread politics. Trippi still remembers serious ethical

discussions about the notes accompanying $5 and $10 donations from the black poor:

> 'I believe in you, Mayor Bradley.' 'You give me hope. I'm not gonna eat today so I can send you this money.' … But Bradley was their candidate. We took the money.[2]

This was Tom Bradley's victory speech:

> Please, I know it's late, but please wake up your children, I have something I want to say to them. … Don't let anyone tell you that you can't make it in this country. … I am the son of a poor family of Texas sharecroppers. I was taught to play by the rules, to work hard, as hard as I could, to never ask for favors …and always to dream. I stand here tonight as living proof that in California, in America, dreams can come true. That someone born with no chance could stand here tonight as the elected governor of the largest state in our nation means that anything is possible — that you can grow up to be whatever it is you dream of being, and from this day forward your parents and I will work together to make sure you have the same opportunity to succeed in life that I had.

Trippi was so happy he cried. 'My God, we had done it. Against the longest odds, we had elected the first African American governor in US history.' But his computer wasn't through with being ahead of its time. It helped Trippi spot a 100,000 vote anomaly. And the candidate slid his victory speech back in his breast pocket.

Despite frequent resolutions not to go back, Trippi continually returned to political campaigning. Appalled by the Bush Administration's delivering government to 'billionaires and multimillionaires' bundling together obscene sums of money to 'buy our government and perpetuate their own wealth and power while our nation's problems are ignored',[3] he became instrumental in Howard Dean's transformation from outsider to frontrunner for the 2004 Democratic nomination. Again IT was

the key. But by then a lot had changed. Out of the ashes of the tech wreck of 2000, 'Web 2.0' was becoming a platform for connection and collaboration of all kinds.[4]

With the involvement made possible by Meetup.com and other Web 2.0 platforms, the campaign had available to it the momentum of community involvement and a source of funding that conjures up images of the sorcerer's apprentice. And this new money flooding into Dean's campaign came from small donations of the many, not the large donations of the few. The Dean campaign eventually failed. Ironically the campaign's 'bottom up' internet strategy left it short of experienced 'ground troops' for local organising. And as Trippi learned to his horror, Dean ran in order to raise his own profile and promote favoured issues, but he hadn't expected and didn't really want to win the presidency.

As he wrote *The Revolution Will Not be Televised* — a book focusing on his experiences on the Dean campaign — Trippi watched the people he'd recruited and led in Dean's campaign use the techniques they had pioneered there to run what Trippi called the 'second bottom-up campaign in modern history, the second presidential campaign to get it'.[5] Having been an architect of the first one, which he regarded as 'nothing less than the first shot in America's second revolution', Trippi prophesied in mid-2008 that Obama's campaign might go all the way. And he prophesied immense significance for this new departure.

> In the coming weeks and months and years, these hundreds of thousands will be followed by millions, and this revolution will not be satisfied with overthrowing a corrupt and unresponsive political system. It won't stop at remaking politics. And it won't pay attention to national borders.[6]

The rest, as we say, is history: Barack Obama's victory speech was not unlike Tom Bradley's undelivered victory speech. Tears of joy could flow freely at last.

II

It is a truism that politicians campaign in poetry but govern in prose, and that was particularly true of Barack Obama, whose soaring campaign rhetoric would always have added piquancy to the inevitable compromises of government. Once elected, there was nothing very 'bottom up' about the new president's mode of operation, which involved the usual cobbling together of coalitions of insiders and interest groups. The design of the American constitution and the cognate traditions of American politics may have made this inevitable. However, I agree with Trippi's view that the President 'blew it' after taking office by making so *little* use of the online grass-roots community he had built and cultivated during the campaign.[7] I'm also sympathetic to Trippi's outrage at big money's ability to manipulate politics and political discourse, so I hope that people might be persuaded to vote for better alternatives. However, this essay argues that there was an inevitability about Obama's disappointing the 'True believers' in America's second revolution.

My thinking is broadly as follows:

1. The ultimate task of party politics is to solve the *e pluribus unum* problem — that is, to forge a unitary governmental will from a diversity of interests.

2. Solving this problem is ultimately an act of coercion that will disappoint some.[8]

3. Given that open deliberation is a precondition for politics to be democratic and fair, the radical new openness of the internet is to be celebrated and offers the *potential* to improve debate and deliberation.

4. However, the mass media has always had the potential to better inform democratic deliberation. And yet it seems increasingly dominated by the values of entertainment rather than deliberation giving us what I call a *vox pop* democracy.

5. Leadership is central to the operation of any large cognitive endeavour — which clearly includes political deliberation — helping focus its attention on certain issues in certain ways, and away from others. Yet the more distracted the populace is with the alarms and excursions of vox pop democracy, the greater the indiscipline of its deliberation and the greater the scope for powerful interests to trivialise, emotionalise and obfuscate public perceptions of issues to advantage themselves.

6. Social media can exert some important checks on vox pop democracy, but it may also exacerbate it.

One thing to be optimistic about is the way in which the internet has fostered a new kind of social and political entrepreneurialism where people use the tools of the internet to build public goods and harness public spirit in ways that are initially at least outside the official organs of government. The essay concludes with some modest suggestions as to how the internet might be used to improve the openness and evolution of political leadership, and how greater focus on deliberative mechanisms like citizens' juries can improve our political life and make political deliberation more truly democratic. The internet can play a very useful role in supporting such forms.

III

The internet has transformed our lives and accelerated human development in myriad ways. Who knew that the community had an encyclopaedia in it? Or that it might write some of the world's most sophisticated and useful software by assembling code written by people throughout the world with quite different needs and skills donating that code without any expectation of direct financial reward? There is a vast number of collaborative platforms on the net that share these characteristics.

- They exist in the world of intangible digital or digitisable 'content'.
- The platform permits a radical openness enabling people to find and enjoy the fruits of others' labours and to collaborate with them to achieve social and/or practical outcomes.
- The resulting content typically meets a need which is principally a private need (this is elaborated on further below). However the result is that goods that were once met as private goods in a market — for instance the market for encyclopaedias, software, or news commentary — can be supplied by unpaid volunteers as free goods.[9]
- Where pecuniary self-interest dominates private markets, the motives behind online peer production are more diverse. On Wikipedia, blogs, Facebook and Twitter one finds a mix of self-expressive, social and other regarding motives.

As progressively more aspects of our lives are sucked into the vortex of market and bureaucratic rationality, it is no surprise that there should be such excitement about this flowering of divergent possibilities whereby costly private goods become free public goods and where motives of pecuniary self-interest give way to a broader canvas of motives.

IV

None of the miracles of Web 2.0 outlined above bear directly on party politics. Yet the stories of Wikipedia and Linux seem to capture a spirit of social mobility, meritocracy and radical openness that we associate with democracy. Might not they presage Trippi's idea that the internet might facilitate 'democracy bubbling to the surface'?[10] There is a naïveté in the image of democracy 'bubbling up' that elides the central task of politics — which is to produce some unitary authority from the desires of a multitude. Joseph Schumpeter's critique of what he called the 18th century 'classical doctrine' of democracy — he

is presumably thinking of Rousseau — helps make the point. The 'classical doctrine' is as follows:

- Democratic institutions tap the will of the people.
- Providing they are rational — that is, not misled, uneducated or delusional — the people's will coincides with their interests or the common good.
- Thus the main task for those who aspire to improve our democracy is to address any sources of unfairness or corruption in representative institutions and any misinformation or ignorance amongst the public.

Schumpeter argues that the classical doctrine is naïve. Firstly, different people have different interests. Some earn profits, others wages. And values can be incommensurable. How should we trade off environmental and economic welfare, health, safety, income and national security? Thus politics is inevitably a struggle for power between people and groups. And even ignoring that, it is a cognitive and rhetorical struggle, as those who represent different perspectives struggle for the hearts and minds of the people.

Schumpeter also makes some telling practical points when he discusses 'human nature in politics' (1943, p. 256). When considering politics, people are in a highly abstract world that's usually far from their own concrete experience. They also know that their own singular vote among millions gives them an infinitesimal chance of influencing political outcomes. So their practical knowledge and their incentive to exercise care are both gravely less than they are when they are making decisions about their own welfare. This invites voting which is at least as much expressive as it is deliberative. In politics the typical citizen:

> … argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective. (p. 262)

If this seems unduly dark or disdainful, perhaps reflecting Schumpeter's Austrian origins and the apogee of Adolf Hitler's power as he wrote those words, he is more prescient about our own time than many of his contemporaries. Likening political campaigning to 'the ways of commercial advertising' Schumpeter observes:

> We find the same attempts to contact the subconscious … the same technique of creating favorable and unfavorable associations which are the more effective the less rational they are … the same evasions and reticences 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.

Schumpeter points out that where advertising cannot sustain demand for a shoddy product as people experience it, there is 'no equally effective safeguard in the case of political decisions'. Did a war or a strike start because of something a political leader said, or despite it? I would argue that this world of unaccountability can lead to magical thinking. For instance, in the republican debate in Australia one popular line of reasoning goes like this:

1. We know all the ways in which today's politicians disappoint us.
2. Therefore: We don't want politicians to appoint our head of state. We want to keep control of the selection of the head of state ourselves thanks very much. We don't want one of those usual politicians to be our head of state.
3. Therefore: The head of state should be elected.

Yet a moment's reflection reveals that the one way to ensure one got a politician as head of state would be to popularly elect them![11] I offer the thought, by way of an aside here, that much enthusiasm for the internet's capacity to transform our politics is

similarly magical in its thinking. The thinking runs something like this:

1. We are sick of the old politics of distortion, denigration and the distractions of the 24-hour news cycle.
2. The internet will enable us to fix this because we can 'take politics into our own hands'.

Like the glamorous assistant disappearing once inside the magician's cabinet, only to miraculously reappear moments later, here the populace disappears when we go looking for the culprits responsible for the toxic state of our political culture, only to emerge as our deliverer moments later. Though its media consumption choices drive the news values of the mass media, though its votes reward the practitioners of the political dark arts of manipulation, distraction and character assassination, the populace remains the victim throughout, not of its own indulgence, but of manipulation by another. It is only by way of this disappearing trick that it becomes plausible to imagine that we might be made whole again if only politics can be taken back, unmediated, to the people.

V

Schumpeter would acknowledge that democracy can be subverted by elites, yet his argument is that democracy can only be *realised* by elites. Democracy is not the absence of elites but the competition within those elites for the consent of the governed. Just as one might say that one has not had a thought until one has properly articulated it, so for Schumpeter the 'will of the people' is something brought into existence as it is articulated — as elites compete for political power within democratic political institutions. Further, governing of a complex society is a complex business, requiring familiarity if not expertise in numerous fields. The unmediated mass of 'the people' won't know enough to ensure

they get government of satisfactory quality. As Schumpeter emphasises in the epigraph cited at the head of this chapter, groups of people get things done by accepting leadership.

Yet one phenomenon of relevance here is the way in which Web 2.0 has disintermediated formal organisations (Shirky, 2008). Just as the internet's disintermediation of established institutions and incumbent interests enhances the competitiveness and efficiency of the economy, so the classical doctrine tempts us to imagine the internet disintermediating existing elites (like party bosses, media empires and business interests more generally) making politics more democratic — taking it more fully back to 'the people'.

It is hard not to be excited by the prospect of disintermediating such elites. But if Schumpeter is right, the real question is what elites might take their place. As James Surowiecki has argued, one of the crucial preconditions for the wisdom of crowds to emerge is that individual perspectives must be 'aggregated' in some way. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook can aggregate that content without 'taking sides' as it were. We are all free to follow whom we want and to weigh their words as we please. But this can't really count for 'wisdom', which requires some selection of right from wrong in an intellectual and/or ethical sense. In this regard, if we are after models from the internet for disintermediating elites, Wikipedia shows some promise because it turns out that the community operating largely spontaneously is capable of exercising sufficient judgment and wisdom to coalesce around the neutral point of view (NPOV) for which Wikipedia strives in all but the most controversial cases. But this is about as far as the new sensibility on the internet takes us. The real conundrum is that the NPOV focuses people on agreeing on what *is*. Politics is necessarily about what ought to be. And the few experiments which have been conducted on divining what *ought* to be from the unmediated input of the populace do not inspire confidence.

VI

As one might expect from the first Administration that had 'got' the internet's potential for energising 'bottom up' politics, the Obama Administration prominently used the internet to open up government in its early days.[12] On 21 May 2009 the White House announced an on-line 'brainstorming' opportunity, asking the question 'How can we strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness by making government more transparent, participatory, and collaborative?'[13] Initially to be open for just one week, this was extended to 19 June on a recently developed Web 2.0 platform, IdeaScale.com, on which visitors could nominate ideas and vote others' ideas up and down.

It seems that the majority of visitors were uninterested in staying within the terms of the proposed debate and pursued their own pet ideas, which one imagines the newly appointed staff of the White House felt obliged to allow to remain on the site — lest they be accused of censorship. With the economy collapsing into the worst recession in three quarters of a century, legalising marijuana easily outranked other proposals. Proving Barack Obama's US citizenship by releasing his birth records also came within the top 10 topics; it would have ranked much higher had there been a satisfactory mechanism for aggregating similar proposals, for the idea of verifying the new President's birth surfaced endlessly.[14]

VII

The Obama Administration's brainstorming exercise offers a simple test of the 'bubbling up' theory of politics and policy making. Yet successful Web 2.0 projects do not facilitate contributions spontaneously 'bubbling up' without mediation. Even where they are dedicated to discussion rather than to converging on a particular view, the *way* internet platforms aggregate content is integral to their ability to add value. At

the very least, executive unity and control over the architecture of the platform is necessary for it to perform this function effectively. And so for all successful internet platforms, the architecture of the project — whether it's an open source software project, a blog or a for-profit social media platform such as Twitter — was originally conceived and designed by highly driven entrepreneurs and is subsequently managed by an elite.

Where the project is for-profit, executive control is typically handled in the traditional commercial manner with a CEO and senior management reporting to a board. In numerous cases the architects of peer production enjoy more control over their domain than the average CEO; for instance, in the case of founding entrepreneurs, such as Mark Zuckerberg or the two co-founders of Google, who are often in a position to sustain an autocracy over their own corporation.[15]

Yet though open source software projects are in many ways the paradigm of peer production — having predated other phenomena of collaborative web by a decade — the task of aggregating code is in one sense more akin to the aggregative task of politics than it is to the aggregative task of social media such as Facebook and Twitter or even Wikipedia. For although Linux comprises millions of lines of code from a wide array of sources and for a vast panoply of functions, any distribution of Linux is a unitary executive entity. Either code is accepted and activated within the program as distributed or it is not. Thus, where one precondition for a healthy market or of civil society is *diversity*, Linux shares with politics the essential task of producing unity (however complex) from diversity. And Linux performs this function without any of the apparent inefficiencies of democratic decision making. Indeed, in form, if not usually in substance, open source software governance is very often a paradigm of autocracy!

As Malcolm (2008, pp. 216–7) observes:

> It is … common for open source software development projects to be governed by a 'benevolent dictator for life' (or BDFL). These are found in projects ranging from the Linux operating system kernel itself, of which Linus Torvalds is the BDFL, Linux-based operating system distributions such as Ubuntu led by Mark Shuttleworth, application software such as the Samba networking suite coordinated by Andrew Tridgell, and programming languages such as Perl, PHP and in which Larry Wall, Rasmus Lerdorf and Guido van Rossum respectively act as project leaders in perpetuity.[16]

Announcing the choice of the penguin as Linux's logo Torvalds had this to say to his collaborators in the Linux community: 'If you still don't like it, that's OK: that's why I'm boss. I simply know better than you do.'[17] Considering this apparently *un*democratic form of management suggests something that has received almost no emphasis in the voluminous literature expounding the revolution of Web 2.0 and peer production: In addition to its output being freely available and radically more open to participation by anyone, peer production has also reenergised leadership. It has done so in various ways:

- The internet platforms that facilitate peer production are overwhelmingly open to all at no cost. In this sense they are public goods. Yet the successful ones are overwhelmingly the product of immense entrepreneurial drive. This seems like an unusual turn in the production of public goods,[18] and one in which leadership is pivotal.
- The radical openness of the internet enables talent to be spotted early and by many people. People join others by following them — for instance on blogs or Twitter — and in doing so they become both the benefactors and beneficiaries of an eco-system which filters the myriad available stimuli elsewhere on the net.[19]

- This environment facilitates meritocracy.[20]
- The vast outpouring of content available on the internet also means that one of the critical services provided by platforms is the filtering of content.
  - In purely social networks like Facebook and Twitter 'friending', 'trending' and 'tagging' provide principal means of filtering.
  - However, where users are interested in the quality of the content, either the project hierarchy filters good from bad content itself a la Wikipedia or it establishes a means by which reputations can be judged. Thus eBay records and presents reputational information to enable users of the site to identify good trading partners. Other sites like Slashdot have built organic, meritocratic elites within the project based on the community's perception of the quality of individual's contributions with enhanced influence rewarding enhanced reputation.

In fact, however, though the forms of governance of Web 2.0 projects are often autocratic, the substance will often be very different. This is partly because of the open, pluralistic and participatory ethos of many web communities. It should also be noted that open source production brings new disciplines upon elites. Where the content is openly licensed,[21] anyone can 'fork the project'. That means taking all the content from an open source project, distributing it oneself under a new 'brand' or label, and including in that distribution whatever changes one desires — presumably changes one could not get the existing project to accept. Thus Linux and Star Office exist in numerous versions which have varying success in the marketplace.[22] This is the great justification for BDFLs. There being negligible opportunity cost in reusing existing digital assets, one can let a thousand digital flowers bloom and observe which thrive and which do not.[23] This provides the

context to Linus Torvald's apparently inflammatory comments quoted above. They were probably ironic.[24]

However, this remarkable new turn is only possible in that part of our world where scarcity has been overcome. Alas, politics can celebrate and harness the gift of diversity among the populace, but its ultimate task — its point — is to take that diversity to produce some unitary will, both to deliver public goods to the community and to define its public ethos.

VIII

Web 2.0 famously taps a richer array of motives for production than pecuniary self-interest, which is the dominant motive in the marketplace. Indeed, Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006) make a persuasive case that participation in Web 2.0 communities can provide a promising pathway to virtue because these communities are ones in which people do what they want to do, often for the love of the activity itself and/or for some civic motive, where they are playing to their own strengths while taking advantage of the best that others have to offer. Yet their argument works much better for peer production of useful digital products like software and Wikipedia than it does for simple social discourse on blogs and Facebook. And the motive force of much of the content on Web 2.0, even if it is not crudely in search of profit or self-promotion, often relies heavily on what Schumpeter called the 'associative and affective'.

Those familiar with the blogosphere know how hard it is to prevent political discussion from degenerating to the lowest common denominator, with each side talking past the other in a predictable rehearsal of ideological prejudice, pettiness and reflex hostility. This tendency of the internet is a commonplace. Yet we have been here before. For decades now the mainstream media has progressively reinforced any natural tendency for political discussion to focus on the 'associative and affective'. In our vox pop democracy the citizenry is endlessly entertained with celebrity gossip and the politics of

complaint and narcissistic entitlement. Everyone's opinion is entertained. No matter how little they know about the subject, they are wound up by talk show hosts or have microphones pressed in their faces as they check out their groceries at their local supermarket.[25]

The tendency seems to be intensifying with 'shock jocks' spreading a culture of narcissistic entitlement in which resentments towards others are nursed. And though left-leaning operatives like Trippi have taken comfort from the internet's capacity to foster bottom-up politics, the same style of 'bottom-up' politics is now emerging on the right, with top-down money power meeting the social media fuelled bottom-up energy of the Tea Party. In terms of the quality of the mainstream debate, things seem to be getting worse not better. In the 2000 election, leading Republican candidates George W. Bush and John McCain paid lip service to the scientific consensus on global warming. In this year's Republican primaries, the Tea Party's influence has marginalised moderates and the leading candidates have (often with discomfort) discarded any scruples about respecting the scientific consensus.[26]

IX

Before concluding, I note that there are some areas in which the internet may have a salutary influence on political culture. Largely outside of party politics but in the penumbra of political activism around it, the culture and tools of the internet are helping to leverage the civic mindedness of talented political activists. Movements of political renewal in earlier periods — I am thinking of the 1960s — often focused on demonising particular attitudes, groups seen to be oppressors (like men, whites or capitalists) and denouncing those in the citadel of political power with a view to one day overthrowing them.

Where in this environment the political activists of the past might have drawn themselves to others' attention by the extremity of their claims or their demeanour, the internet is

creating an alternative, and surely preferable means to those seeking to change our political culture. It provides a very public forum in which people can not just argue their case, but also put their own ideas into action. They can 'earn their stripes' by building digital public goods on the internet and enthusing and empowering others to make their civic contribution.

Led by Tom Steinberg, the activists of MySociety in the United Kingdom have built a variety of digital public goods to assist in both delivering government services and intensifying government accountability. Thus, for instance, FixMyStreet.com enables constituents to register potholes and other problems requiring local council maintenance. TheyWorkForYou.com provides the kinds of services that Hansard's website already provides — access to speeches and other parliamentary proceedings — but does so in ways that reflect political activists' sensibilities. Thus its mission is not simply the provision of information but the fostering of constituent activism and interaction with their representatives.[27]

In this world of social and political usefulness there is less emphasis on the typical power-plays of party politics in which everyone's effort is singularly focused on the ultimate outcome of winning a particular ideological or personal battle. On the internet you don't know from where the next big idea — the next platform — might come. And when it comes there will be much excitement and collaboration around participating in the project. This milieu has generated a 'live and let live' ethos which dials down the cultivation of enmities and encourages people to get on with doing what they can for their own favoured causes and projects. It is surely highly salutary that the internet lowers barriers to enter this world of civic endeavour as much as it does and that the space it creates is as transparent as it is. For one time-honoured dilemma of democratic politics is enabling voters to discern between those motivated by civic spirit and those motivated by power and

self-interest. A portfolio of work on the internet enables voters to identify political activists who can demonstrate their civic *bona fides* in their involvement in such projects — and of course the activists who have yet to make a similar contribution.

The net has also lowered barriers to entry, and barriers to being noticed among political commentators. Thus in Australia it is hard to think of three more talented political commentators discovered in the last few years than Tim Dunlop, Bernard Keene and Greg Jericho, all of whom came to us via the internet. Alas, the mainstream media's use of the internet for talent spotting has been lamentable, with none of the above mentioned having achieved a prominent mainstream media presence.

X

Rather than swoon at the chimera of a more '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 — 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. Here, experience on the internet offers some interesting clues. It should be clear by now that I have no panaceas to offer, and notwithstanding the above section of this essay, do not even expect minor miracles of the order of Wikipedia, Linux or Google. The problem of how we govern ourselves is an ancient and tragic part of the human condition. I would nevertheless offer the following tentative thoughts:

- Internet reputational systems may provide one means of invigorating the process by which political elites form. Thus, for instance, a project I am working on, FixMyBudget,[28] which will 'crowdsource' suggestions for improving the budget bottom line, will give greater influence to those who develop a reputation for high-quality contributions.

While we hope the reputation system will ultimately be an organic expression of those on the site, reputations will initially be awarded according by a benign dictatorship. Note however that because the site seeks input on what ought to be the case rather than the NPOV or what is the case, deciding who will get good reputations will require much judgment. Further, it would be possible to develop different reputational systems depending on one's ideology. This could be good for diversity of discussion, but at the cost of making the pathway to a unitary perspective longer.

- One of our most democratic institutions — the jury system — has been nurtured within the elite institutions of the legal system to be largely insulated from the populist infections of vox pop democracy. The jury system is an institution that builds for each case a cognitive elite which, in contrast to the populace from which it has been chosen, has deliberated in great depth on the evidence and arguments in the case at hand and which is yet a democratic elite.

- One way of doing something similar in the political arena is the consensus conference, which involves appointing a small jury-sized group by random selection from the populace and having it deliberate at length — including by hearing evidence from experts — on some political question.[29] Typically, the conclusions of the body have no legislative or executive force, but inform other citizens of their fellows' deliberations. To prevent the manipulation of its citizens' initiated lawmaking by wealthy interests, Oregon has recently implemented a process whereby citizens' initiated lawmaking can only occur alongside citizens' deliberations of this kind.[30] Though it is too early to tell, there is evidence that such deliberations are both of interest to, and influential in, the thinking of the populace.

- I have also argued that this could be generalised further into a house of Parliament that is chosen in a similar way.[31] The purpose is to create a democratic environment for genuine deliberation away from the endless hunt for entertainment and sensation. Such a body should not displace the basic process by which people vote for a government of their choice. However, to enable it to have more than advisory power, I have proposed that it have a power to delay bills in the same way the UK House of Lords has. The benefits of such a chamber are that, like the citizens' jury mechanisms mentioned above, it would provide a means of democratic deliberation away from the alarms and excursions of vox pop democracy. We could see what a demographically representative but otherwise random sample of the people, having taken the time to consider the issues, thought of various proposals. The chamber would also broaden our pool of politicians by assisting talent spotting and promotion in a political world that is otherwise collapsing into careerism.

In all this the internet could assist deliberation. It could help support a jury or a chamber in its deliberation in myriad ways, by lowering the transactional costs of participating at times and from places where face-to-face contact was impracticable. This would increase the efficiency, and more excitingly, the depth with which deliberation took place.

In summary, though the internet can be expected to bring us far more good than bad in all manner of aspects of our lives, in the essential task of politics — finding ways to build some unified will from diversity — there are no miracles in sight. Indeed it is hard to imagine them coming into being.[32] 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.

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Endnotes

1 Schumpeter, 1943, p. 270.

2 Trippi, 2008, Loc. 640–61.

3 Trippi, 2008, Loc 4435.

4 In this essay my references to the possibilities of the internet are typically references to 'Web 2.0'. The term Web 2.0 is loosely interchangeable with 'collaborative web' and 'social media' and refers particularly to the nature of the internet since the rise of 'platforms' such as Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia which enable people to find each other, connect and collaborate on the internet.

5 Trippi, 2008, Loc 79.

6 Loc. 248.

7 In discussions with me and no doubt elsewhere.

8 Higley (2009, pp. 446–7) puts it: Where conflicts of interest are not rationally reconcilable, politics are the alternative to civil warfare. … [A]ctions that do not seek to coerce some persons in ways that are advantageous to others are by definition not political.

9 They are typically 'free' both in the sense of having a zero price (free beer) and in the sense of being freely editable and/or augmentable (free speech).

10 Trippi, 2008, Loc. 187–9.

11 The reader here should not read any support or opposition to other arguments for and against Australian republicanism.

12 On the very first day of the administration, Obama issued his Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, affirming his administration's commitment to:

> *creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government. We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government.*

http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/

13 http://opengov.ideascale.com/

14 Of the 25 proposals placed between 51st and 75th on a list of 4,166 ideas, two thirds related to releasing Barack Obama's birth certificate or similar

documentation. Often the ideas were declaratory rather than functional — for instance the third most popular idea was to 'End Imperial Presidency'. The incoming Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition in the UK ran a similar 'brainstorming' exercise searching for suggestions to save the budget money. Many of the suggestions were useless, being banal, frivolous or declaratory — without clear policy content. In the case of the proposal to 'End Imperial Presidency' there was some policy or at least practical specificity provided in the fine print.

> *Leave the White House less imperial than you found it. Appoint an independent prosecutor to prosecute Bush, Cheney, and their top officials in order to deter in the future the crimes of aggressive war, misleading congress, defrauding congress, misspending funds, war crimes, murder, warrantless spying, torture, domestic propaganda, violations of the Hatch Act and the Voting Rights Act, obstruction of justice, misprision of felony, retaliating against whistleblowers, etc. Restore to Congress the power to legislate, the power to begin and end wars, the power to raise and spend money, the power to approve or reject treaties and appointments, and the power to oversee the functioning of the federal government including through the power of impeachment and the power of inherent contempt. That means no more signing statements rewriting laws, and instead support for legislation that would criminalize such behavior. And it means similar action on each of the other offenses.*

There followed over 600 more words beginning 'We the people must:' and comprising 18 further action points.

15 In some cases, particularly where the project aspires to an altruistic social mission, some effort may be made to devolve power to others, though there are limits to the extent to which this can be done whilst retaining effective executive functioning. MySociety, which runs a number of Web 2.0 sites designed to improve democratic transparency and accountability and the process of government in the United Kingdom, runs as a charity with a board of trustees. Wikipedia has experimented over the years, but its founder Jimmy Wales appears to have near veto rights over large areas of policy.

16 Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales has also enjoyed the status of BDFL at Wikipedia and appears to retain strong veto rights within what is now a more devolved governance structure.

17 http://p2pfoundation.net/Linux_-_Governance, accessed on 22 January, 2012.

18 Dewey (2008, 272) is, as ever, illuminating on this theme:

> *The organised community is still hesitant with reference to new ideas of a non-technical nature. … A new idea is unsettling of received beliefs; otherwise it would not be a new idea. This is only to say that the production of new ideas is peculiarly a private performance. About the most we can ask of the state, judging from states which have so far existed, is that it put up with their production by private individuals without undue meddling. A state which will organise to manufacture and disseminate new ideas and new ways*

of thinking may come into existence some time, but such a state is a matter of faith, not sight.

19 Facebook and similar social networking platforms offer a plethora of privacy options which enable people to take such activity within the specific online communities that arise as a result of people's 'friending' and following choices.

20 See Steven Levy, 2012, 'Mark Zuckerberg, the Hacker Way and the Art of the Founder's Letter', *Wired*, 3 February, downloaded from http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2012/02/zuckerberg-hacker/ on 5 February 2012.

21 Open licences allow unfettered use, reuse and remixing of the licenced content, for instance through the GNU General Public License (GPL) or Creative Commons (CC) licensing.

22 One can do the same with the content of Wikipedia.

23 Michel Bauwens makes a similar point at http://blog.p2pfoundation.net/peer-governance-and-wikipedia-interview-with-bauwens-bruns/2009/06/22, accessed on 28 January 2012. Even here of course we are not in nirvana because of path dependency. Wikipedia's incumbency gives it advantages over alternative forkings of the project. And with Linux we see that the ability to fork may actually work against the interests of the project and its offshoots considered as a whole as it fragments the user base and developer effort.

24 As Jimmy Wales explained to the Wikipedia community in 2002:

> *Anyone who disagrees with these governance policies has very little reason to complain. If you want to set up a Wikipedia that is an experiment in anarchy, or an encyclopaedia for the purpose of pushing your own political vision … then you may do so, and I will help you if I can.… There's no need to argue with me about it — you should consider me totally bullheaded and beyond the possibility of change on this point. But take comfort in the knowledge that you can set up your own project and do things your own way.*

http://meta.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia_Governance&diff=1639&oldid=1621, accessed on 23 January 2012.

25 This is the environment in which what Stephen Colbert has dubbed 'truthiness' becomes the 'word of the year' in 2005. 'Truthiness is the currency of political combat in the mainstream media. A statement with 'truthiness' bears a completely incidental relationship to the facts but feels intuitively right. We 'feel it in our gut'. Thus to take just a few quite random examples each of the following has sufficient 'truthiness' to travel as a virulent meme through our mass media whilst being factually completely false or highly misleading:

- that the ALP thinks that $150,000 per year makes a family rich. (Its spokesmen have never said so.)
- that Tony Abbott's reaction to the death of a young Australian soldier was 'Shit happens'. (He was caught on camera saying this to a superior officer of the deceased soldier as a summation of what he'd been told

— that the death was 'one of those things' that can be attributed to the general dangers of war rather than any identifiable wrongdoing.)

- that Obama apologises for America. (He hasn't — at least in the sense that is implied.)

26 See, for example, http://johnquiggin.com/2012/02/05/republican-idiocracy/

27 Thus constituents can use it to track specific matters of interest or particular members of parliament and measure the responsiveness of representatives. Ironically those in Hansard are major users of the site as it is more easily searchable and the public's involvement leads to more typing mistakes being identified than their own site.

28 http://fixmybudget.com.au

29 Often some steps are taken to ensure some basic degree of representativeness of the group vis a vis gender and other aspects of the population.

30 http://participedia.net/cases/oregon-citizen-initiative-review-cir

31 N Gruen, 2005, 'A People's Chamber', ClubTroppo at http://clubtroppo.com.au/2005/06/19/a-people%E2%80%99s-chamber/

32 Chairing the Australian Federal Government's Government 2.0 Taskforce (2009), I felt that the politicians that had commissioned us to advise them were not after advice on how to use the internet in party politics, something about which the Taskforce could lay no claim to expertise in any event. Our report was focused rather on the ways in which the spirit of the social media platforms that were burgeoning online might improve the process by which the work of an elected government is done. That having been said, one thing I said in my transmission letter to ministers which was intended to apply to that latter challenge also applies to the prospects of the internet enriching modern politics:

> *[O]ur challenge has been to avoid the gimmickry of the latest fad in favour of outlining how the new approaches might reinvigorate the time-honoured and hard-won traditions of modern democratic government.*

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