

Civic hacking: a new agenda for e-democracy

By James Crabtree,
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Representative democracy seems troubled. People are ignoring it. It is not exactly hip with the kids. A little like the unfortunate uncle who gate crashed the party, it hangs around trying to convince people that its magic tricks are interesting.

Electronic democracy (e-democracy) is viewed squarely within the remit of representative democracy. 'The Internet' is the new trick. This amazing device – full of youth, verve, and energy – might just be The Answer to its problems.

This, give or take, is the UK government's current strategy. It recognises that our democratic system, while not exactly broken, needs pepping up. In particular, it recognises that young people, who tend to be keen on all things wired, frankly do not see the point of politics. It reflects the fact that the political classes are hunkered down under a big tent marked 'disengagement'. The Blair government thinks the internet, this marvel of the modern age, can help.

At best, this view is half right. Networked technology can help representative democracy a little, but it is unlikely to be able to help a lot. It comes down to a basic problem: if someone isn't interested in politics, and they don't see the point in taking part, doing it online is not going to help much.

The good news is that there may be a better way. The internet can help to improve the civic lives of ordinary people, but only if it is based on a different principle. E-democracy should not be primarily about representation, participation, or direct access to decision makers. First and foremost, it should be about self-help.

Public investment in e-democracy should be about allowing people to help themselves, their communities, and others who are interested in the same things as them. As I will explain, the centre of such a strategy should be state support for what I call 'civic hacking', or the development of applications to allow mutual aid among citizens rather than through the state.

If you are not interested in politics, electronic politics will not help

The current British government has got the right question, but the wrong answer. Its question is: how can we use the internet to help people get the most out of civic life, politics, and the way in which they are governed? This is based on a fairly sound analysis of the current problems of democracy. Steven Coleman and John Gotze, in their pamphlet *Bowling Together*, put this analysis rather well:

“There is a pervasive contemporary estrangement between representative and those they represent, manifested in almost every western country by falling voter turnout; lower levels of public participation in civic life; public cynicism towards political institutions and parties; and a collapse in once-strong political loyalties.”

So far so good. But Coleman and Gotze, and by extension the British government, come up with the wrong conclusion. They seem to think that people are in some way held back from participation. If we made it easier – step forward ‘the internet’ – they might decide to get involved. If we made participation in traditional processes a little less tedious, the punters would come back. There would be greater citizen involvement in policy making.

The assumption seems to be that if we make the entry route a little sexier (electronic voting not ballots, online consultation not paper consultation) it will make the system work. To be fair, it might make a difference. The excellent British website Fax Your MP, for instance, notes that “67% of our users report that they have never contacted their MP before” suggesting that new ways of access can bring “mostly new participants to the debate”. But this is by no means the only avenue open to government.

Reciprocity online

The opportunity is the construction of a civic space in where citizens talk to each other, rather than to the state. An analogy will help explain this. If you are stuck in a computer game, what do you do? Gamers today – and remember around three in ten people play computer games – will go to a gaming community online, and ask others for advice. They will almost always find someone willing to help them overcome the challenge. Other gamers will help for a variety of reasons: they may get respect for their knowledge; their standing in the community will improve; or they may simply be in a good mood that day. But mostly they do it on the principle of reciprocity.

Common in social capital literature, reciprocity means nothing less than you scratch my back, I will scratch yours. This principle is limited if there are only two people, and only two backs. It works better if reciprocity is distributed: I will scratch your back, because this will create a system in which back scratching is the norm, and when I need my back scratched, someone will do it for me.

In politics, as in computer games, reciprocity means helping someone because, at some unspecified point in the future, you will need someone else to help you out too. It is the rational realisation of ‘do unto others as you would have done to yourself’.

What you definitely do not do when stuck in a computer game (or how to load it, or how to make it work better) is e-mail the software designer and ask them to make the game easier or better. Yet this is precisely the current British government’s strategy for e-democracy. Got a problem? Go take part in an impenetrable consultation exercise that might, in some distant way, improve the system. Not exactly a hot selling proposition.

The game analogy holds because, for most people, politics is like being stuck in a really difficult computer game. Government bureaucracy – the software designer – is a total irrelevance to their daily lives. Citizens rub up against the state in numerous complicated ways: bins need to be taken out, unemployment benefits collected, and doctors visited. But the process of deliberative politics is not part of everyday life.

This is why we have a pluralist theory of democracy. Interest groups, the media, and other functional groups represent the interests of people in a battle of ideas. The basic foundation of democracy – that I should be able to have a fair shot at influencing a decision that affects me (if I can be bothered to) – sits within this framework.

In everyday life, however, most people encounter problems. Some of these problems are caused, not solved, by the action of the state. By this I do not mean theoretical concepts such

as regulatory capture, inefficient use of public money, or government disconnection from the views of ordinary people. I mean that tax forms are a real pain. I mean that paying council tax is complicated, and finding a good school for your daughter is time consuming. Starting a new business is a nightmare, and trying to work out how much of a pension contribution you should be making is difficult. These are everyday problems that government is pretty good at creating, but not very good at fixing.

These problems are exactly the same as getting stuck in a computer game. They are life problems – obstacles to be overcome. The best way to overcome them is to find someone else who has done it before, and get them to help you. And this is where the internet can really help.

The democracy application

Network technology is very good at bringing people together, if they have a reason for getting together in the first place. It is, as anyone who has surfed will know, a veritable haven for cranks and obsessives of all varieties. But it is also the most incredible fund of distributed intelligence ever conceived.

It allows the aggregation of distributed and networked knowledge, and makes it accessible to pretty much anyone with a bit of skill and a modem. For computer games players, or financial investors, or stamp collectors, it is a dream come true. It can also be for citizens.

The question is: how can you translate this self-evident quality of the network into an application which can help people overcome life problems, or participate in civic communications with others interested in the same issue? At present, this is the problem: you can't. Why not? Because no one has developed the application.

Application is another way of saying programme or software. It is a thing that uses the power of the internet in a relevant and useful way. Internet Explorer is an 'application' which allows users to see HTML code as web pages. More famously, Napster, the music file sharing system, was an application that allowed you to download music. It was developed by a 19-year-old called Shawn Fanning.

Fanning's story is internet folklore. A young techie gets an idea. After a considerable amount of time spent in his bedroom, he developed an application that would allow others like him, albeit illegally, to swap compressed music files. It took off, and the music industry will never be the same again. Other applications have since been written which do the same thing, but better or faster or with less central control. But it needed an application to work in the first place.

The point is that it required someone to develop the application. Napster was useable, cool, and fulfilled a previously unavailable function. It introduced file sharing – or peer-to-peer (P2P) technology – to a mass audience.

Andrew Schapiro, author of *The Control Revolution*, thinks that Napster remains the defining lesson in how the internet changes static systems: "when you are thinking about this always ask 'Napster is to music as X is to Y'." So: Napster is to music as what is to politics? Who is developing Citizster, or Polster?

The problem is, we do not know yet. But, somewhere, someone should be developing it. My contention is that the role for the state should be to fund people to do this. They should be giving money to civic-minded groups, or 19-year-old kids, to develop applications that will help meet social goals.

This is exactly what happens in broadcasting, where the state (and by extension all of us) ladles out millions every year to develop socially beneficial television and radio programmes. This is done, quite rightly, because it is socially useful. The same should be true with software. I call this idea 'civic hacking'.

Funding civic hacking

The website Meetup is a good example of civic hacking. It is not an application as such, but it is based on much the same idea. The site allows people with common interests to meet up with each other. Let us imagine that Mr Kennedy moved to a new town, and wanted to meet other people who were interested in the works of J S Mill, the principles of social justice, and popular news quiz shows. But Mr Kennedy does not know anyone like that. He could go on to Meetup, and register his interests. When enough other people have done the same, the site sends you an e-mail and suggests you meet for a drink.

Equally, the British website UpMyStreet recently launched a site called Conversations, in which people from a local area can initiate discussions about topics of interest in their street or local area. Both are a simple idea. They will not make anyone a gazillion dollars, but they could become useful tools for the social capitalist and ways of making social connections. And both required someone to develop software to make it happen.

A civic hacking fund could help develop similar ideas. At the moment there is a market failure, in as much as people tend not to make money off these types of application, no matter how socially useful they are. The applications that can help people help each other need state funding to get going.

I stress this is not the total answer. It will not end disengagement as we know it. It will be completely useless for people who are not online. It will also not be any help to people who cannot be bothered with politics full stop. But then these are the sorts of people who, for the foreseeable future, are not going to go anywhere near a political website anyway.

But, in a decade or so, everyone in the country will be online. Most people will have made the internet part of their everyday life. By this time we need to have developed useful programmes – Napsters for civic life, Meetups for democracy – which people will want to use. And that means we need to start doing so now.

The e-democracy ethic

The question is simple: what is the ethic of e-democracy? What is the underlying principle that should guide us in this process of development? The current consensus is that money and time should be spent developing new ways of allowing citizens to interact with parliament and the state. It claims that representation is the ethic of e-democracy. I disagree.

Marshal McLuhan's dictum was: "The medium is the message". At base, this means that certain media, or mediums, are good at doing different things. The internet is peculiarly effective at connecting groups of people together. In fact, this is what it does best.

Hacking in this case does not mean computer piracy, or breaking into computer systems. Instead I take the original meaning, a process of designing software in an open collaborative way. It is defined as: "The belief that information-sharing is a powerful positive good, and that it is an ethical duty of hackers to share their expertise by writing free software and facilitating access to information and to computing resources wherever possible." A Hacker is someone who follows these principles in the development of software, not someone who tries to electronically break into Fort Knox. Click for more '[Hacker-information](#) [1]'

So, a sensible strategy would start on this principle. But the people it should be connecting are not citizens and parliamentarians, or voters and civil servants. It should be connecting ordinary people with other ordinary people. And there should be applications that help these people to help each other. A programme supporting civic hacking can do this.

This should become the ethic of e-democracy: mutual-aid and self-help among citizens, helping to overcome civic problems. It would encourage a market in application development. It would encourage self-reliance, or community-reliance, rather than reliance on the state.

Such a system would be about helping people to help themselves. It would create electronic spaces in which the communicative power of the internet can be used to help citizens help each other overcome life's challenges. Most importantly, by making useful applications, it would help make participatory democracy seem useful too.

Bottom line: it is a political project. It needs backers. Any champion of e-democracy should take up the fight.

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