

Tocqueville in Cyberspace: Using the Internet for Citizen Associations

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Political theorists like Alexis de Tocqueville have long recognized the importance of citizen associations for the practice of democracy. Through participation in associations, citizens both receive an education in public affairs and create centers of political power independent of the state. Essential to participation in an association is participation in a forum, a communication space that allows for many-to-many communication in which citizens can “treat of public affairs in public” (Tocqueville, 1945, p. 109). Participation in forums suffers from numerous barriers, however, such as the need to meet in one common place, the need to meet at one common time, and the potentially high costs of participation. Online forums on the Internet avoid many of these barriers, and thus they hold the promise of facilitating the formation and operation of citizen associations. This was confirmed in 1995 by the experiences of a Boston-based citizen association, the Telecommunication Policy Roundtable–Northeast (TPR-NE). TPR-NE’s uses of the Internet suggest that online forums may allow associations to be more responsive, more robust, and able to unite more members.

Keywords associations, democracy, forum, Internet, many-to-many communication, political participation

The diffusion of the Internet has generated interest in its application to democratic politics. With its ability to put information power in the hands of the people, the Internet holds the promise for wider and more effective citizen participation in public affairs. This article focuses on one use of the Internet for democratic practice: online forums to create and sustain citizen associations.

Received 19 July 1998; accepted 25 January 1999.

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Citizen associations figure prominently in democratic theory, most notably in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville (1937, 1945, 1955). Through participation in associations, citizens both receive an education in public affairs and create centers of political power independent of the state. Essential to participation in an association is participation in a forum, a communication space that allows for many-to-many communication in which citizens can “treat of public affairs in public” (Tocqueville, 1945, p. 109).

The Internet provides a new means for realizing forums. This is a development of historic significance, for there has been practically no innovation in many-to-many communication in over two thousand years (Laudon, 1977; Grossman, 1995). The meeting hall used for today’s town meeting, citizens group, or Congressional committee differs little from the forum used by Greek citizens in classical times. The Internet changes that, making possible many-to-many communication without the use of a physical meeting hall. In what follows I consider the implications of such online forums for citizen participation in associations.

This topic can be situated in a wider body of knowledge concerning electronic democracy. Electronic democracy has already received sustained attention in past decades as successive waves of new communication technologies have provided new means of political communication. Scholars have analyzed the impact on political participation of broadcast television (Fishkin, 1992), cable television (Davidge, 1987), telephones (Laudon, 1977), and computer networks (Downing, 1989; McLean, 1989). Although conclusions have varied, many authors have lamented the technologies’ lack of interactivity, bidirectionality, or broad accessibility (Dutton, 1992).

The recent wide diffusion of Internet technology offers yet another opportunity for increased citizen participation in public affairs. With its relatively low cost, ease of use, and broad diffusion, the Internet overcomes some

of the barriers that hindered the democratic use of previous technologies (Browning, 1996). For example, Internet-based civic networks have linked together citizens in local communities, offering easier access to public information and promoting greater citizen involvement (Schuler, 1996; Tsagarousianou et al., 1998). In public administration and governance the Internet has been used to decentralize administrative operations (Loader, 1997). Online activists participating in petition campaigns, elections, and other activities have achieved some notable successes, as documented by Browning (1996) and Mann (1995).

Some literature on online democracy has addressed the topic of association. Schneider (1996) directly addresses the issue of using the Internet as a public forum, noting that online forums provide space for public discussion but that unequal rates of participation raise questions about the equality of members in the forum. However, he focuses on online forums in the context of a public sphere for discussion rather than political activism. Myers (1994) does examine the political uses of the Internet, providing a broad overview of its use in social movements. Forums are only one of many applications he addresses, however, and his analysis largely relates to their ability to create greater “density” among political participants (1994, p. 256). In his case study of Internet use in Berlin, Schmidtke (1997) mentions the use of Internet forums for social movements, but his observations on reduced costs and collective identity are presented only in summary form. Finally, Groper (1996) examines the potential of e-mail to reinvigorate American democracy by reeducating citizens about participation in public affairs, thereby offsetting a trend toward apathy and alienation. Although each of these writers examines an aspect of Internet and associations, a more general discussion is lacking. Here I consider the role of associations in democracy, the barriers to their formation and operation, and the novel capabilities of the Internet that relate to these issues.

In what follows I begin with a discussion of the role of associations in political theory, drawing largely on the work of Tocqueville. In the next section I present a case history in which an Internet forum was employed by a citizen association. Finally, I offer conclusions about the possible impacts of the Internet on citizen associations.

DEMOCRATIC THEORY, CITIZEN ASSOCIATIONS, AND FORUMS

Democratic theorists have long recognized the importance of associations. By joining together in association and acting collectively, like-minded citizens can gain a voice in public affairs. Perhaps the most influential writer on the role of associations in democratic politics is Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America* (1945, originally published 1835). This section provides an overview

of the role of associations in democracy, drawing primarily on Tocqueville.

In his study of American democracy, Tocqueville endorses government by the people but expresses his fear that citizens may neglect the duties that accompany democratic government. Citizens in democracies often suffer from what he calls “excessive individualism,” the tendency to focus exclusively on private affairs and to neglect public affairs: “Individualism . . . disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends so that . . . he willingly leaves society at large to itself” (1945, p. 104).

When citizens neglect public affairs, rule by the many can become rule by a few. Politics becomes the domain of a few groups, individuals, or institutions, and this subset of the society may eventually tyrannize an atomized and apathetic citizenry. One potential form of tyranny is the “tyranny of the majority” (1937, p. 269). When a majority of the citizens win control of the government, they may use state institutions to oppress the minority. A second form of tyranny is the state itself, which can become autonomous of the citizenry. When citizens become atomized they are each individually powerless against the enormous resources of the central state, which may then take advantage of the imbalance of power. In either case—when the state is controlled by a majority or when it becomes autonomous of the citizenry—it may abuse its power over citizens.

Citizen associations counteract this tendency by uniting individuals into larger collectivities. An association “consists in the public assent which a number of individuals give to certain doctrines and in the engagement which they contract to promote in a certain manner the spread of those doctrines” (Tocqueville, 1937, p. 199). By uniting individuals with a common agenda and common interests in a group, an association counteracts citizens’ tendencies toward excessive individualism and neglect of public affairs.

Associations reinforce democracy in two ways. First, they educate citizens in political participation. An active and informed citizenry is a prerequisite for effective popular sovereignty, and participation in associations reminds citizens of the importance of public affairs to their own private affairs: “As soon as a man begins to treat of public affairs in public, he begins to perceive that he is not so independent of his fellow man” (Tocqueville, 1945, p. 109). This awareness prevents individuals from neglecting their duties as citizens to participate in democratic governance.

Second, associations are a political force in their own right. As citizens combine in collectivities, they create peripheral centers of power independent of central state institutions. Associations can perform the same function in a democratic society that the aristocracy performed in earlier feudal societies, when aristocratic estates constituted power centers independent of the throne. By dispersing

power more broadly in society, associations counteract the centralization of power. Without associations democracy might perish: “If men living in democratic countries had no right and no inclination to associate for political purposes, their independence would be in great jeopardy” (Tocqueville, 1945, p. 115).

Tocqueville was not the first theorist to write on associations. In “The Federalist No. X” James Madison (1937) started by noting the *dangers* of associations. Madison referred to associations as “factions,” noting that factions pursue their narrow collective interest against the common interest of the citizenry as a whole. Should a single faction unite a majority of citizens, it could tyrannize the minority. Madison’s solution is not to forbid factions, however, but to promote them. When a republic incorporates many factions, and when those many factions represent many different interests, then no one faction is likely to gain a majority and tyrannize the others. A healthy democracy depends on the number and diversity of its associations—a conclusion similar to that of Tocqueville.

Contemporary social scientists have also observed the importance of associations. In the pluralist paradigm of state–society relations, politics is seen as competition among organized interest groups. This presupposes an ability on the part of citizens and other social actors to form associations to aggregate their interests (Dahl, 1961; Wilson, 1973). Social movement theorists have also examined how noninstitutionalized actors engage in collective action to promote social change (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Like Tocqueville, these writers stress the importance of associations for democracy.

Given the vital functions performed by associations, it is important to understand how they work. A basic mechanism for citizen associations is the forum. A forum is a means of many-to-many communication that allows citizens to actively speak before their fellows and to engage in group decision making. In a forum, citizens “treat of public affairs in public,” speaking in front of other citizens and thereby educating themselves in participatory democracy (Tocqueville, 1945, p. 109). A forum also makes possible collective action. By “conversing with each other every day,” participants can define a common program, and thereby they can achieve the political power that comes with coordinated activity (Tocqueville, 1937, p. 120). Thus a forum is a mechanism both for direct citizen participation in public affairs and for achieving power through collective action.

Tocqueville identifies two technologies to achieve a communication forum: the meeting hall and the newspaper. Each has advantages and disadvantages. A meeting hall is a true forum, in that it allows participants to meet and engage in face-to-face communication. Many-to-many communication is achieved in direct and immediate form. Tocqueville refers to “the power of meeting” that

arises because “[members] have the opportunity of seeing one another; means of execution are combined; and opinions are maintained with a warmth and energy that written language can never attain” (1937, p. 199). Participation in public affairs is at its fullest with this type of forum.

A meeting hall forum suffers from severe barriers in space and time, however. The requirement that all participants assemble in a single location may impose considerable hardship on those who reside far away. As a result, not all members may be able to participate, or the frequency of participation may be low. Additional barriers arise from the requirement that participants assemble at the same time. Even if each individual has time for participation, as a collective they may be unable to find one common time. The need to synchronize schedules may be a more severe barrier than the time requirement of participation. Together, these spatial and temporal barriers can severely undermine a meeting hall forum’s utility for an association.

Another, related barrier is cost. In order to participate in public affairs, even if only in a local association, a citizen may incur substantial private costs. Transportation, synchronization, and participation in a meeting may all impose costs, as may the rental of a meeting hall and a host of other factors. From a strictly economic perspective a rational individual might determine that the cost of association exceeds the benefits, and so might refrain from participation (Olsen, 1968). This may hamper participation, leaving each potential participant “detained in the place of his domicile by the narrowness of his income or by the small unremitting exertions by which he earns it” (Tocqueville, 1945, p. 120). These mundane barriers to forums can undermine associations.

Tocqueville sees a solution to some of these barriers in the print medium of newspapers. Newspapers provide another means of achieving a forum, allowing dispersed members to “converse every day without seeing one another, and to take steps in common without having met” (1945, p. 120). A newspaper can unite many members in daily communication, thereby maintaining the unity needed for effective citizen action. Indeed, so vital are newspapers that Tocqueville declares a necessary connection between them and associations: “newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers” (1945, p. 120).

Newspapers overcome geographical barriers to communication because they do not require readers to assemble in a common location. They also impose little need for synchronization, and they are low in cost. Moreover, newspapers address another problem of associations—the need to identify like-minded citizens. Potential members of an association, dispersed from one another, face difficulties in identifying each other. Even if enough people with a common interest exist, they may remain hidden from each

other. A newspaper serves as a “beacon” to attract dispersed citizens to an issue, overcoming the barrier to the recognition of their common interest (1945, p. 120).

Newspapers nonetheless suffer from their own limitations. A newspaper is not a true forum, for it allows only one-to-many communication rather than many-to-many communication. It is a broadcast technology in which few speak and many listen—a problem noted implicitly by Tocqueville when he states that “nothing but a newspaper can drop *the same thought into a thousand minds*” (1945, p. 119, emphasis added). The act of reading a newspaper offers a less participative experience than does attendance at a meeting, and as a result its educational and solidarity-enhancing benefits are less. Although it is a social medium that is supportive of the public sphere, a newspaper cannot substitute for a meeting. While it overcomes barriers of space, time, and cost, it does not allow for many-to-many communication.

In summary, Tocqueville argues that citizen associations are vital for democracy and that forums are the means by which participants educate themselves in public affairs and formulate collective positions. Meeting halls can host forums, but they impose barriers of space, time, and cost. Newspapers overcome these barriers, but at the expense of active participation.

Clearly, the problem of public participation in democracy involves more than communication technology. Numerous other factors like the distribution of wealth, access to education, civic culture, and political institutions play enormous roles in democracy, and no technology by itself can offer a solution to the inherently social problem of public participation in community affairs. Yet communication technology remains an important factor in political practice, sufficiently important for Tocqueville to claim a necessary connection between newspapers and associations. As new communication media have emerged since the time of Tocqueville’s writing, they have created new opportunities for a variety of political practices, as documented by the literature on electronic democracy already cited. The recent emergence of the Internet offers additional novel opportunities.

THE INTERNET AND DEMOCRACY

The Internet provides new means of achieving the many-to-many communication of a forum. The most common applications for achieving online forums are newsgroups, which enable participants to post messages in a common message area, and listservs, which enable subscribers of a mailing list to send messages to all other subscribers. The characteristics of these online forums differ significantly from both meeting hall forums and newspapers. Compared to a meeting hall, the Internet has fewer barriers of space, time, and cost. Compared to a newspaper,

the Internet allows for far greater participation in many-to-many communication. By providing a new technology for forums, the Internet opens new possibilities for citizen associations.

The case study in this section provides some empirical evidence of the Internet’s utility.¹ In what follows I trace the activities of an ad hoc citizen association in Massachusetts that attempted to influence federal policy-making in the area of telecommunications. This history offers insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the new technology.

In the mid 1990s the U.S. Congress undertook the modification of the nation’s regulatory framework for telecommunications. The final product, the Telecommunications Reform Act of 1996, was the first comprehensive revision of telecommunications regulation since 1934. It contained a variety of regulatory changes, including the deregulation of local telephony, the allocation of the spectrum to be used for digital television broadcasting, the reduction of prohibitions on crossownership of local cable and broadcast television, the redefinition of universal service regulation, and new regulations on “indecent” content on the Internet (Telecommunications Act of 1996, 1996).

In the years preceding passage of the act, interest groups in the telecommunications, broadcast, and cable industries played a major role in shaping the legislation (Corcoran, 1994). Public interest groups also attempted to influence the legislation, since regulatory change had many public interest implications (Hyatt, 1993). Changes in restrictions on media ownership would affect media concentration and, ultimately, editorial content. A redefinition of universal service would affect citizens’ access to new technologies. Changes in regulations of public access, educational, and government channels on local cable networks would affect the viability of community television corporations. Regulation of “indecent” programming would limit speech on the Internet.

In 1993 a number of nonprofits and public interest groups in Washington, DC, created a coalition called the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable (*New York Times*, 1993). Among the early members were the Center for Media Education, the Taxpayer Assets Project, the American Library Association, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR), and the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC). Participants met monthly to hear reports of new developments, to promote cooperation among the various participants, and to coordinate their advocacy efforts relating to telecommunications reform.

In the summer of 1994, a grassroots version of this roundtable formed in Boston. This was the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable–Northeast (TPR-NE), a participatory association of citizens, nonprofit organizations, and public interest groups that joined together to exchange information and promote common positions on

the aforementioned issues in federal legislation. TPR-NE sought to complement the Washington roundtable by working at the local level and by contacting Massachusetts legislators directly in their home districts. The initiative for TPR-NE came from local organizations, including the Boston chapter of CPSR, Citizens for Political Participation and Action (CPPAX, a local activist organization), Emerson College (a local college specializing in communication), Boston Neighborhood Network (the city's public access television station), and the Center for Information, Technology, and Society (an independent think tank.)

TPR-NE developed in three stages during 1994 and 1995. In the first stage, the initiators focused their efforts on internal organization: During the fall of 1994 a core group of five activists met and decided to collaborate in the creation of the association. Meeting on a biweekly basis they discussed possible activities for the association, eventually settling on a strategy of public education through a series of issue forums. They planned a speaker program that would educate citizens and nonprofits about their stakes in telecommunications reform. They then actively publicized the association and its activities in relevant communities, such as libraries, public access television stations, and educator groups, initially drawing on a network of acquaintances established during an earlier CPSR conference on information infrastructure (Klein & Whitcomb, 1993).

In this first stage of its activity, TPR-NE used the Internet heavily, primarily to identify and attract individuals and groups sharing an interest in telecommunications. Tocqueville noted the power of a newspaper to serve as a "beacon" to attract like-minded citizens; here the Internet proved considerably more powerful, because it provided a means to proactively solicit participation. Personal e-mail messages were sent to individuals known to the organizers, and generic announcements went to listservs and discussion groups used by local groups. Subscribers to one listserv frequently forwarded announcements to other listservs, thereby quickly and effectively publicizing TPR-NE's existence to communities not addressed in the original messages.

As one of their first actions, the TPR-NE initiators set up their own listserv. Individuals interested in TPR-NE could subscribe to the listserv, and any electronic mail sent to its Internet address would be resent to all subscribers, thereby allowing for a group discussion in which everyone could talk to everyone. This served as the core forum for the association, and in the following weeks the number of listserv subscribers and the volume of communication grew steadily. The listserv proved useful for discussing plans of action, distributing legislative analyses from Washington, and disseminating minutes of meetings.

Even at this early stage the value of the Internet for the association became apparent. The listserv had impor-

tant social psychological effects, helping participants develop a common identity. As people became involved in TPR-NE they often did not know each other; face-to-face meetings were somewhat sporadic; the whole effort was intermittent, voluntary, and achieved with no budget. The listserv provided a known, reliable, and constant stream of dialogue in which participants encountered and communicated with each other. Insofar as the listserv was active, the association existed. Online communication also kept morale high in the early weeks when participants were few and concrete activities nonexistent. By interacting online, participants developed a shared perception of relevance, and that perception became a self-fulfilling prophecy as individuals worked together to develop a program of action. Without such frequent online interaction, a sense of isolation and futility might well have set in.

More concretely, the listserv greatly facilitated administration. TPR-NE participants held occasional face-to-face meetings, which required that they agree on a common time, an agenda, and other details. Use of the listserv rendered these mundane and potentially time-consuming chores much easier. Many-to-many communication allowed the group to self-organize rather than to rely on a designated administrator. Without this, participants' limited time could easily have been consumed exclusively by administrative matters.

The second stage of TPR-NE's development consisted of public education. Having developed solidarity and planned a program, from November 1994 through April 1995 TPR-NE hosted a series of speaker panels on policy issues. The panels covered such topics as access to information infrastructure, journalism on the Internet, libraries' and towns' use of information infrastructure, and most importantly, the telecommunications reforms under way in Congress. Each forum consisted of a panel of three to five speakers, and each was videotaped and cablecast on local public access television stations. Attendance at one panel numbered about 50, while most attracted from 20 to 30 people.

The Internet provided a low-cost, effective means of publicizing these events. Just as the announcement of TPR-NE's creation had been widely posted on the Internet, so were announcements of individual events. It took little time or money to reach a wide audience. More significantly, use of the Internet helped overcome barriers to attendance at these panel events. Shortly after each one a summary and review could be posted, so that the many people who did not attend could still derive some benefit.

During this second stage of development, the volume of traffic on the TPR-NE listserv grew considerably. With the number of participants increasing to over 100 and with interest in the issues running high, the volume of e-mail messages on the listserv often exceeded 20 in a day. This revealed important advantages of the online forum over

a meeting hall that derived from the Internet's text-based communication format.

Written communication reduced the time needed to participate in the forum. With text messages participants could quickly examine incoming communications and decide how much time to invest in reading them. In a meeting-hall forum a listener must listen to all speakers, for the speaker controls the duration of his or her communication. With text messages the speaker and the listener share control. Recipients of e-mail could decide whether to read messages fully, skim over them, or skip them entirely. Thus, although traffic on the online forum grew quite heavy, each participant could decide how much time to invest in reading messages.

Text-based communication did, however, impose restrictions on messages' content. The use of e-mail greatly inhibited the discussion of ambiguous concepts. *Unambiguous* concepts, such as meeting times, phone numbers, or agendas, could be easily expressed in written form. However, if participants wanted to discuss the subtleties of language in proposed legislation (e.g., what is the meaning of "equity" in the context of a national information infrastructure), then text-based communication required both skillful expression and lengthy communications. Creative brainstorming was also rarely achieved on the Internet. Face-to-face communication worked far better for such discussions, since it allowed for the use of gestures, intonation of the voice, and rapid interactivity among participants.

TPR-NE moved to a third stage of activity in the spring of 1995, when it began to actively lobby policymakers. In an effort to influence legislation, a delegation from the association visited the offices of the three Massachusetts Congressmen most active in telecommunications policy, Senators Kennedy and Kerry and Congressman Markey (Hohler, 1995). Each visit lasted about an hour and was spent discussing issues of access to information, public access television regulation, universal service, and Internet pricing. The delegation expressed support for or opposition to various pending legislative provisions.

Although the act of lobbying policymakers did not take place over the Internet, the listserv proved unexpectedly useful even in this phase. Since TPR-NE was never formalized, the association had no count of membership to quote to policymakers. However, the number of listserv subscribers provided a measure of the association's size. The act of subscribing to the listserv set a minimal threshold of membership; by subscribing to the listserv (by sending an e-mail message to an automated enrollment program, which denied no one) an individual acted to become part of the association. The count of the subscribers, which was nearly 200 by that time, manifested the size of citizen interest in telecommunications reform—and could be cited as such to lawmakers.

Ultimately, the activities of TPR-NE had an impact. Shortly after the delegation's visit to his office, Senator Kerry successfully amended a Senate bill to render it more favorable to public access television. Although TPR-NE's actions were undoubtedly not the sole cause of this outcome, it seems likely that it was influenced by the fact that local citizens had organized around the issue, attracted substantial public interest, and lobbied legislators (Alliance for Community Media, 1996).

Thus in less than 1 year, TPR-NE established itself as the focal point for grassroots telecommunications policy activism in the Boston area. With nearly 200 subscribers to its listserv, a core group of about a dozen participating organizations, and up to 50 people attending its speaker panels, TPR-NE could legitimately claim to be a voice for the public interest. It had organized around an online forum. It had educated the public in the issues. And it had voiced concerns to Massachusetts legislators, contributing to legislative outcomes. Although its achievements were hardly grand, TPR-NE had succeeded as an association for citizen participation in public affairs.

CONCLUSIONS

Three structural characteristics of the Internet most greatly differentiate it from other technologies for creating forums. These characteristics allow an online forum to avoid the barriers of a meeting-hall forum. First, the Internet is freer from constraints of space. No longer do participants have to assemble in a single place to communicate with each other, a condition of a meeting-hall forum that sets up severe barriers to participation. Members who cannot attend meeting-hall forums can now use the Internet to participate. Instead of passively receiving information broadcast through an association newspaper, they can actively take part in discussions. Although this is a less rich interaction than a meeting hall, it is an improvement over a newspaper. This opportunity for participation can make membership more meaningful and more attractive to the participants who cannot attend meetings. By allowing a higher degree of participation to larger numbers of people than was previously possible, online forums enable associations to attract and keep larger numbers of committed members than would otherwise be possible (other things being equal).

Second, the Internet is freer from constraints of time. Communication in an online forum does not require close synchronization between participants, so it is much easier for large numbers of people to participate. This avoids the temporal barriers of a meeting-hall forum. It also brings greater continuity to associations by allowing discussion to continue during interludes between face-to-face meetings. This can reduce the fragility of citizen commitment, reinforcing morale and solidarity during periods of inactivity.

Associations that employ online forums are more robust, retaining their collective identity and their solidarity over time.

Finally, the Internet lowers the costs of participation. Participants can avoid the expense of transporting themselves to the meeting hall; they still have to get to their computers, but that can be much less expensive than walking, driving, or flying to a forum. Participants can also reduce the high costs of coordination; instead of rearranging their schedules to attend a group meeting, they can read others' messages at their convenience. Furthermore, because communication is text based, participants can quickly scan communications to eliminate those with little content and to focus on messages they consider more important. Finally, they can reduce their costs of participation in a host of other ways that are not specific to many-to-many communication but that reflect the benefits of digital technology. They can reproduce and distribute documents online, instead of photocopying. They can access information sources previously available only through libraries. They can avoid costly telephone calls and slow postal exchanges. Participation in a forum consumes less of each participant's limited resources.

A final impact of the Internet on associations may be to increase citizen responsiveness. In response to a crisis or an opportunity, ad hoc associations can be more easily created, and existing associations more easily reactivated. A citizen action can be announced on existing listservs in order to attract participants, and a forum can be created quickly at nearly no cost to participants. The same flexibility that computerization has brought to industry (Piore & Sabel, 1984) can now be realized by associations, with the result that grassroots movements may quickly coalesce in response to emerging issues.

Although significant, it must be recognized that these benefits constitute marginal improvements over current practice. Optimism about the Internet's benefits should not lead to utopianism. The claim here is that online forums facilitate association, not that they overcome all barriers of association. The Internet's greatest contribution is likely to be as a complement to the meeting-hall forum rather than as a replacement. Face-to-face communication is as vital and as beneficial to associations today as it was in Tocqueville's time, and without some meeting-hall forums it is unlikely that an association could operate effectively. Likewise, newspapers remain an indispensable means of disseminating information and analysis. Finally, as noted earlier, no technology by itself can offer a solution to the inherent social problem of citizen participation in democracy.

The Internet also introduces some new barriers of its own. The required investment in computer and communication hardware, monthly service fees, and computer skills

can be significant. Effective expression in a text-based medium requires a high level of education. These barriers make it likely that, at least in the near future, the Internet's democratic potential will be exploited by relatively elite groups of citizens with the money, access to technology, skills, and general education to use them. This is evident in the case of telecommunications reform described earlier, in which the citizens who effectively organized online were also those with the skills and resources to use the Internet. Still, as more and more citizens gain access to the technology and as new generations of computer-literate schoolchildren mature into adult citizens, participation in online forums may become more broad-based.

This suggests a program of action for those who would promote greater citizen participation in public affairs. The technology for online forums exists today, but its broad utilization still remains to be achieved—a situation not unlike that of other communication technologies, like community television and radio (Klein, 1999). Realization of the Internet's potential will likely require continued diffusion of the technology, broad-based implementation in existing associations, and the education of citizens in the opportunities for collective action that are now possible. Already today, organizations like the Association for Progressive Communications (APC, 1999) pursue a mission of diffusing the Internet to citizen-activists and nonprofit organizations, but full and effective diffusion will require the efforts of countless more individuals and organizations. Further diffusion of the skills needed for effective online collaboration is also needed (James & Rykert, 1997).

Writing in the mid-19th century, Tocqueville stated, “[T]here is a necessary connection between public associations and newspapers: newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers” (1945, p. 120). In the 21st century that necessary connection may be between associations and the Internet. Online forums made possible by the new technology offer the possibility of stronger and larger associations, which can empower citizens in democratic participation.

NOTE

1. An earlier version of this case study was presented at the Internet Society 1995 International Networking Conference, Honolulu, HI, June 1995.

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