

## **Tech ethics: The values questions raised in a digital democracy**

July 10, 2009 by [Taylor Willingham](#) | [Edit](#)

The first part of this posting is from Taylor's Blog posting. Below are John Stephens comments.

For the first session of the No Better Time Conference, I helped facilitate a session with my colleague, John Stephens.

**Description:** Many attribute the dramatic increase in youth engagement to shifts in the way democracy worked in this past presidential election, particularly the Obama campaign's more technological orientation.

### **Workshop Goal:**

This session will examine timeless questions – who controls information, who participates in policy making, how do we ensure equal voice and opportunity, what happens when we skip the relationship-building aspect of strengthening public life – in a new, techno-democracy.

### **Our workshop began with these questions:**

A. What does the dramatic increase in youth engagement (heavily tilted toward online and new communication media) mean for face-to-face democracy-building?

B. Where are the digital divides – age, economic disparity, language – and how do we overcome them?

C. Who controls information exchange? Extremes: no control, free expression and flame wars, “unfair” claims OK vs. Need general rules for the road, and OK for content creators to retain some/significant control over flow of information

D. New media, journalism, and the tension between accountability and openness/privacy. Recent example: Iran protests and Western journalists inability to confirm images/reports as accurate, but went ahead and used them.

E. Are the technology advocates in sync with the deliberative democracy advocates?

Of course, we built on these questions and, in some cases we reframed the questions.

### **Some of the themes:**

There is the ease of voluminous feedback (due to technology) but how do we process this? What does a senator or representative do with that amount of information? There is a tension between too much information and the ability to do something with that information. We need to consider what it looks like to try to manage the communication coming into an elected officials office.

Having access to more technology may or may not translate to activism.

Grassroots are engaging in online campaigns, but they also need to think about how that information is being used. Congressional leaders are not feeling as though they are coming through citizens in authentic ways. Therefore it is very important for grassroots organizations to put a face on their message even if it comes through technology – using YouTube, for example. But elected official still needs to know the source, to authenticate the sender.

Citizens are not just voters. Office holders are not just recipients of information. Media is not just the emitter of information. We need to move beyond seeing citizens as a mass to be moved on behalf of the organization.

What are the dark sides of technology?

- More is not necessarily better even though technology. When postcards are
- More people are practicing journalism, but we don't have standards.

Question that wasn't part of the original discussion: What about the power of technology to capture stories and histories that haven't been told? And when those stories are captured, what obligation do we have to make those stories technologically accessible to others?

Technology can give more people more voice in other ways than is out there, but you must still consider the audience and whether or not you will have any impact. It DOES make a difference to be able to speak / write in an impactful, thoughtful and deliberative way.

With the demise of the newspaper, there is a loss of the canon. When that is not there on the local level, what do we do? How do we know what to trust? It may even be gone on the international level as in the case of the information that is coming out of Iran. Without trained, trustworthy journalists on the ground, how do we decide what to trust?

But lets consider, the lack of media trust. What came first? Did loss of trust in the media became the impetus for the growth in citizen media? We don't trust the information we are getting from the media. People will decide what to trust.

How do we marry the best of the new technologies with what we value about the best of deliberative democracy?

Mike Mansfield noted three types of representatives:

- The representative who represented their local constituents
- The educator who tried to let the constituents know how they voted and why
- The Statesman

Elected officials have spent energy trying to make sure that the information and the communication they are getting is coming from their constituents. But the technology could make it possible for us to think about how our elected officials could become part of a deliberative body and reflect the concerns of their citizens, but also to deliberate what is in the best interest of the entire country.

At 11:30, we did a round robin asking each person to weigh in on:

### **Where are we in our thinking?**

Those of us in communication departments need to teach people how to engage online. Comments in newspapers are flaming and horrible so that the question becomes, "who wants to be there?" How do we elevate the level of online discourse? People are already self-proclaimed journalists. We ought not to be flaming each other!

I am thinking about things I've never considered. Although we have more digital sources, some things remain true. We have to think about tailoring our message, for example. "How do I make the message interesting? Who is my audience?" Face-to-face or online, we still have to think about some of the same issues – trust, is another issue!

We have spent 80% of our time on worries, but let's also think about what we can dream about.

AH! But I swing in the opposite direction! For my doctorate, I looked at whether or not the drastic predictions about the telephone came true. The complexity of what we are talking about is so complex that we probably can't being to predict where we will be in five years. We must look at the ethical and literacy issues. This is much bigger than I thought.

I've noticed a tension between availability and spread of technology. The purpose of more is so that more people can participate. I love that, but the recipients are still skeptical about source of information and need to screen comments which then is the opposite of democracy.

How do we teach the strategies and rather the technology? How are we meeting people where they are? There is a question about creating a norm around citizen journalism, but that undermines the value. A lot of the things we see as solutions cycle back and become problems.

Looking back on my experience as a Congressional assistant – a positive position might mean that an elected official could have a monthly live webcast to talk about issues and then to get feedback from different constituents. It could be a give and take, not just a means to manipulate constituency.

Because I teach, I think in those terms We have to be careful to not prejudice one technology or information means over another. Students must have strategies for evaluating technologies like twitter

just as we try to prepare them for other information literacy and evaluation of other forms of media. I see opportunities to incorporate some of these conversations into our work with Congress. We can help them to reach out and engage more deliberatively. I'm still concerned about accountability. I will feel like it's important to know that a site is credible.

### **What is our contribution to the broader themes of the conversation? How will our discussion help produce a more deliberative system?**

- How can we help elected officials? What do we know about what they need? Is it really a conversation or government 2.0 if the Representative only follows one person? Staff sizes have not increased even though amount of citizen input has. We need to let elected officials know that they appreciate what they are doing. Majority of communication from constituents is to ask for something, not to say thank you.
- If grassroots campaigns and form letters are not effective, how do you reconcile that with the need to make it easy for people to engage? To think that the volume is the way to effect change is incorrect. Legislative staff will say that change comes from personal stories. Groundswell is important, but "individually sentimented" conversation is important.
- Even in discussing technology, we need to focus on strategies, not the technology itself. Even if we are talking about technology, it is just one tool. People DO still buy newspapers.
- In academia, we have a bias against popular media. We need to change that as educators. It is out there and we need to teach students how to use it effectively.

90 / 9 / 1 Rule:

- 90% of the people in a collaborative environment are "readers"
- 9% are editors
- 1% are posting new ideas

"The world is arranged for those who are extroverts."

To what extent is the deliberative democracy world arranged for extroverts? In some ways, the online world can help blur that divide for people who may be comfortable engaging online in ways that they wouldn't in person.

If we buy into that 90/9/1 rule, there are situations in which that might be fine – for example in generating ideas. We need to be conscious of this reality and acknowledge that platforms A, B or C may be limited in the way people can become engaged.

Inclusivity is very important and the "tech filter" leaves out so many people. This is still an issue we must address.

### **From John Stephens**

Technology has increased the avenues for potential participation – online social media, key pads and cell phones to register preferences/votes, etc.

The good news: increased ability reduces some traditional barriers to participation and deliberation.

Results: new voice, more reach, and often recognition and new connections within a geographical area and more broadly.

====The challenges/tensions:

1. Accountability and responsibility in participation – ability to comment once and then withdraw rather than engage over a period of time
2. Access – physical, financial and time availability to engage in online methods
3. Digital literacy
4. Concerns about standards of authenticity — ability for "astroturf" presentation of supposed grassroots concerns – how do you verify that a real person is on the end of the message sent to a leader/elected official?

BUT

In efforts to screen for authenticity/real person, could undercut the openness of citizen reporting and journalism.

===As with other “lower tech” means – similar challenges apply – what is the right method/s of communication? May differ between:

- a) Getting the right information out – in a timely way, in an understandable language, to people ready for the message
- b) Time for people to understand and probe the information/issue – time to dialogue, deliberate
- c) Clarity of how they can respond, choose or influence the discussion and decision
- d) How they can clearly state their preference/vote

===The demise of some large metropolitan papers (example: Seattle Post-Intelligencer) is causing the loss of some good values of traditional journalism

- a) Common information/issue read widely in a community
- b) Fact-checking and seeking “balance” or multiple perspectives

Seems to be leading to wide suspicions of a range of online information and blogs – what is their real agenda?

===A focus on preparing college students – less about the technology and more about strategies for assessing information

- a) How they need to consider their audience
- b) The purpose of their message
- c) Ethics – their engagement with others

===Does much of the phone/Internet/Social media focus more on the ability to be fast and wide ranging and necessarily sacrifice thorough, slow and thoughtful interchange? Example: twitter.

===One similarity – old and new media:

Concern about wrongly privileging one kind of information/media avenue over another

===Digital – no one size fits all and “old techs” still have their place (example: radio, newsletters, journals, etc.)

===Lots of deliberative democracy is designed for extroverts. Usually relies on motivation to talk and engage face to face. Some technologies can help introverts contribute more.