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**The Improbable Dream: Measuring the
Power of Internet Deliberations in Setting
Public Agendas and Influencing Public
Planning and Policies**

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When the Internet became a generally useful tool in the mid 1990s, there were many who saw its potential to benefit the practice of what is called, in somewhat of an unprecise dichotomy, both representative and more direct democracy at different levels of governance.

It was clear from the beginning of this “movement,” that the Internet, with its two way interactive properties, could be used by governments to make many of its services more efficiently available to citizens online. Many polities had already begun their “e-governance” phase much earlier than that, as William Dutton, *et al* described in detail in their book *Wired Cities*. (Dutton, et al. 1987).

The new, more public friendly Internet, however, took “digital democracy” to a new level and has proved to be, by far, the preferred way new forms and degrees of representative democracy have been in interactive contact with the public in many facets of government, from renewing drivers licenses to downloading tax forms. Even the most modern of “democracies” – from Switzerland to Singapore – provides today numerous efficient services via the web. Indeed, the list of potential uses of government information and services provided via the Internet seems to grows exponentially each year. E-government is on the move.

Of course, there were many different uses by which the Internet was seen as helpful to improve the quality of democracy, particularly in terms of empowering citizens, i.e., emailing their opinions to their representatives and various and sundry government officials, and themselves take part in planning, making and/or implementing policy decisions for their polities. Legislators were quickly made aware of the value, for instance, of having “chats” with online constituents. Emails to from citizens to legislators and vice versa did become commonplace. Political parties now use the Internet to help with informing party members and in helping organize party

activities, including campaigns of candidates for offices. And a number of experiments have been carried out whereby the Internet has been used in actual political situations for voting for candidates as well. The list is now long.

One of the most valuable properties of any democracy, whether representative or more direct, or some hybrid or degree of both, is the importance of informed deliberation before taking decisions on any kind of issue, problem or plan. Legislative assemblies routinely engage in open (and closed) debate. Political campaigns are premised on the assumption that voters will cast ballots on what they learned during the campaigns. City planners hold hearings where evidence is presented and weighed before plans are made and executed, and so on.

Among the many problems that need to be researched and experimented with is the question of how efficiently the Internet has been used to date to enhance the deliberative process in democratic processes. William Dutton, Jay Blumler and Kenneth Kraemer were eerily prescient in 1987 when they – during pre-Internet times, in the era of ARPANET – noted that “there are inherent biases in the newer electronic media that reinforce more democratic and decentralized modes of communication (and) that the new media provide the capability for telecommunications to reinforce face to face (f2f) patterns of communication.” (Dutton, et al., 1987, p.22). So, has this pro-democratic “bias” inherent in the fundamental infrastructure of the new telecommunications technologies, i.e., the Internet, produced more, greater or better forms or degrees of democracy in the “Wired, wired West?” during the years around the change of century?

Generally speaking, even as late as the middle of 2006, the answer to this must be “not much”, if by that one means more Internet based deliberative democracy where the input made a significant penetration into the halls and minds of those who govern. There have been a smattering of innovative citizen deliberation projects that have had (or are in the process of

having) direct impact on the public decision making processes of some polity. But the clearest examples of this phenomenon are f2f, not electronic, and when, perchance, this does occur via some electronic participation, it often happens accidentally or serendipitously and is difficult to measure since it is hard to construct measurement instruments for something that is unexpected.

To support this pessimistic statement, we refer to the United Nations “Global e-Government Readiness Report”

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public//documents/un.unpan019207.pdf>

and <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan021888.pdf>

Herein, data describing 2004 and 2005 are provided. The two countries analyzed later in this paper, Sweden and the USA, are given a high score in the Report concerning output of e-Government services. But e-Government is not what is discussed in this paper. Concerning “e-Participation”, the situation is different. Sweden is placed quite low, and the US is falling. Accordingly, the first of these Reports states that “many countries encourage participation but provide limited relevant and qualitative mechanisms to allow user feedback”.

As a further example, let us refer to the 2005 situation in the United Kingdom. A number of “e-Democracy activities” have been presented there (www.edemocracy.gov.uk). In a long list, we find Local e-Democracy as a heading comprising: e-Consultation, e-Citizens’ Panels, e-Petitioning, online councillors’ strategies, issues forums, blogging, webcasting, committees information systems, citizenship with school pupils and parents, engaging community leaders in decision making, targeted e-Democracy websites for specific user groups, SMS as an engagement tool, video kiosks as an engagement tool etc.

No doubt this is an impressive list. Certain resource amounts are allocated, for instance in March 2005 close to \$1 million (US) for “Local e-Democracy National

Projects, including citizenship online games, democratic activities direct to school children, cooperation with the BBC, web based democracy icons for special citizen groups, video kiosks for young people, web sites for the 50+, etc. Such activities can be found in a few countries, although the amounts allocated to such projects naturally differ. No doubt this indicates a will to try new technology to engage people in community issues. Still, it is the opinion of the authors that when we aim at real citizen influence on public decision making, the words given above are words of support for citizen influence more in theory than in practice.

There are exceptions, though. One of the most highly praised citizen empowerment experiments is the citizen budget making forums in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil (“participatory budgeting”). As part of the ideology of the Socialist Workers Party in that city, the citizens assemble in various neighborhoods (all are welcome as in New England town meetings) to discuss, debate, exchange information and then vote on how the city’s annual capital projects revenue should be spent, e.g., on what, where, and how much. The results of these forums, after being linked and collated, are considered strongly relevant to, if not binding upon, the city government.

This process continues at the present time, is widely cited and studied, and there is extensive replication throughout Brazil and even in other countries. However, the recent election of a more conservative mayor may have some negative influence on that process in Porto Alegre for the time being.

Another example of how f2f processes can have major impact on official policy making occurred In 2003 when the Parliament of British Columbia decided to allow the citizens of their province to decide whether or not to change their system of elections, and if so, to recommend what kind of system they preferred. Thus, they created the Citizens Assembly to

do this job. This assemblage was comprised of 2 citizens from each electoral district in the province who were chosen by a random selection process (one man & one woman from each legislative district) and they were paid for their work and time. During 2004-2005, the Citizens Assembly of British Columbia conducted open public hearings throughout the entire province, sending out email newsletters and press releases on their progress, and listening to a wide range of alternatives.

When they completed their hearings and their deliberative process, thousands of citizens had participated. In 2005, they recommended a particular change, i.e., a whole new system for elections called STV-BC. This was then put to the general public for a final up or down vote in a referendum. According to the original B.C. Parliament mandate, if 60% of the voters in a supermajority of the districts voted yes, it would automatically become the law. What happened was that 58.4% said yes in all but two of the fifty-one districts. Thus, the new system did not automatically become the law, but even as we write this, they now talk of a revote. For a full picture of how the Citizens Assembly process worked and how STV-BC works (even an excellent animation), click on www.citizensassembly.bc.ca

Two other examples of how f2f citizens deliberative panels (chosen by stratified sampling techniques) have impacted legislation can be cited. The first is the Danish Technology Board which convenes stratified samples of citizens into consensus panels whose deliberations and recommendations have strongly influenced their sponsor, the Danish Parliament. According to the founder and initial director of the program, Lars Kluver, approximately 70% of the Boards' recommendations have found their way into law. (Becker and Slaton 2000, p.184)

The second are the "*Planungszelle*" (Planning Cells) invented by Dr. Peter Dienel of Wuppertal University in Germany. These f2f citizens panels are sponsored by various

municipalities throughout that country, to help influence the planning process for their futures. According to Dr. Dienel, since most polities do not usually choose to utilize this method, when they do, they informally bind themselves to the results. Making the process “official” and having heavy media coverage also has a near binding effect.

It would seem that the Internet, as widely used as it has come to be, and with its strong, pro-democratic structural bias, could offer numerous examples of equally successful public inputs into a vast array of public decision making. After an intensive study of many communications experiments designed to empower citizens, three American researchers had this to say in 1998: “The Internet offers the greatest potential for reconnecting the public—at least those with access to it—with the political process. The Internet connects individuals through Usenet news groups, electronic bulletin boards, issue forums and chat rooms that create virtual communities and afford people an unregulated platform to express their views. Grassroots activists employ the Internet to proselytize the unconverted, inform their supporters, and urge them to action. However, public officials have so far done little to effectively use email or the Internet to communicate directly with voters. Currently, their presence is largely limited to their homepages which are little more than 24 hour cyber-campaign offices.” (Johnson, Hays and Hays, 1998, p. 227).

Their book covered a broad range of experiments designed to “engage the public” in an informed and usually deliberative manner in public decision making. That study was done 8 years ago. Has the situation changed much since then? There is much online discussion and contact. But is there noticeable, much less measurable, citizen influence on public decision making? In the next section of this paper we will take a look at experiments in Sweden and the United States that at least made an attempt to plug Internet deliberations into something other than electronic discussion “for the sake of electronic discussion”. The list is

admittedly short. We are aware of the fact that there is other evidence. One can mention projects run by e-the-People, Information Renaissance and others. It is our opinion, however, that this type of e-democracy expands surprisingly slowly and it is worth wondering why. This impression of slowness was confirmed at a meeting in Stanford University, California, in May, 2005.

The conference “Online deliberation 2005” gathered some 150 expert participants, most of whom evidently had an interest in participatory democracy, but from differing origins. Models for deliberation were presented, and the word “communication” was frequent in the presentations, but little evidence of any effect of online input was given. Especially scarce was any discussion on citizen influence via the web on decision making. There was more interest in the dialogue effects of blogs and wikis, although it was clear among many that technology itself is not the answer when we stress increased citizen participation in governance. Technology may help, but political will and organization is needed. The Stanford gathering provided few new data on the importance of online deliberation for decision making. In that respect, it supported our view in this text.

We want to emphasize that the discussion presented here concerns Internet supported citizen influence on decision making. We do not analyse web contacts, blogs etc as such. Our interest concerns the degree to which the decision makers, the politicians, choose to listen to Internet ideas, discussions and votes of citizens in the web between elections. In this paper, we draw a sharp conceptual line between different forms of citizen discussions and contacts on one hand, and deliberative citizen influence on decision making on the other. Our interest here concerns the latter of these two.

The Swedish Experiments: Designs, Findings and Lessons Learned

(1) Kalix:

Swedish experiments involving the Internet in the setting of public agendas vary from case to case. One of the most well known occurred in a small borough in the very north of Sweden called Kalix. It occurred in 1999-2000. What happened was that during the elections in 1998 there seemed to be some major concerns about creating a “greener Kalix.” This stemmed from a growing sense among the citizens that a “softer” community center was necessary. In other words, the people were getting fed up with too much automobile traffic and an increasing density of people in the city’s core. A new political coalition was elected with this in mind.

Not only was the newly elected government convinced that something needed to be done about this problem, they were also convinced—and said so during the political campaign—that the public needed to be involved in consultation with the government about what the problem really was and perhaps what solutions there might be. What they had in mind were open hearings and web based communications.

The first phase of this project took place in September 2000. The idea behind it was to be very open-ended about how to define or describe the problem. Informative texts and graphics were distributed to the populace via public meetings, fax, email, telephone and newspapers. The question was basically: “Are you in favor of change”? There was no room to discuss any costs for any such changes. In addition, the political parties themselves did not participate as such.

So what happened? Almost 1,200 people participated in the “Kalix-1 Consultation” – by voting or commenting over the web. This was roughly 8% of the adult population. So, neither the process nor the result was anywhere near definitive, and in the minds of many, it was a bit of a disappointment. Of course, how often does 8% of any city’s voters

participate in any kind of city planning? Such is a rarity. But if the goal was to get substantial citizen input, Kalix-1 fell short.

It is our view (and the view of many in Kalix) that one major reason for the relatively small engagement was that the problem was already well known and there was not much interest generated by rehashing it. Let's say it was non-provocative. Also, there was not much deliberation either in f2f groups or on the web.

So, a second consultative project was designed: Kalix-2. This time the problem was reframed in terms of the cost and how to pay for any such resurrection of the city centre. In other words, if you want a "Greener Kalix," should taxes be raised? Should they stay the same? Should taxes be lower? This topic definitely aroused more interest because it surely concerned all who paid those taxes. So, although the choice of the subject definitely was prompted by what the formulators felt would be of interest to the citizens, the range of alternatives that were offered were still quite narrow, therefore so was the range of the deliberative process.

The Internet was used extensively in Kalix-2. Information was posted about meetings (time and place), about whom to contact and how to do that, chat rooms were set up and used, and last but not least, people could vote on the issue from their home via the Internet ... as well as from public places. Every voter was given a password that could be used just once if they voted on the Internet.

Did it work? Well, the turnout was far greater in Kalix-2 than in Kalix-1, and so was the level of interest. About 52% of the people of Kalix participated in Kalix-2 in some way. And of the 7,000 participants, over 2,000 used the Internet (about 28%). What is most interesting is that the public's view was that change was possible, but only a minor increase in taxes would be necessary. This demonstrates to us that the public was

both constructive and responsible in their desires. This is contrary to much public criticism about online citizen deliberations. Did this project, with its Internet activities as a part of the process, actually have any influence on the political leaders who designed it and if so, how much? Precise measurement is difficult in such situations. So, what conclusions can we draw?

- The choice of political subject matter is an important one to consider when designing a public consultation process. The matter to be dealt with should be of common and strong relevance to the citizenry and it should be specific enough, and provocative enough, gain and maintain their interest.
- Although the political leaders seemed to support this consultation, the political parties in this case did not, and this may have had a significant effect both on the level of participation and the direct impact.
- Interestingly, unexpected and often constructive citizen suggestions were made during both the f2f and Internet discussions.
- The citizen participants in Kalix-2 expressed qualitative political desires, in the general public interest, in this case to put reform priority for the elderly, to schools, and to employment support.
- The agenda setting, however, here was mainly done by the politicians.
- The public participated responsibly.
- Since the project was “consultative,” the political leaders could choose to listen or not in their final decision. Even well paid expert consultants get ignored. The degree to which the politicians in this case chose to listen was, and is, always difficult to measure.

However, as a political result for the following two years that passed, the Kalix politicians allocated 3 million Swedish crowns per year to programs consistent with the citizens' desires as manifested in Kalix-2. This was likely different from what the politicians would have chosen "themselves". They did choose to listen this time.

The Kalix consultations can be seen as a successful experiment in public participation in a dialogue with city leaders. Also, the use of the Internet was a significant part of that process, not so much as a completely Internet based deliberation, but as a part of a more general community interaction.

On May 22, 2005, Kalix did carry out a public referendum concerning school policies. There were possibilities for online contacts before that, but this referendum itself did not use the Internet for collecting opinions, for reasons of insufficient voting security. Participation was 33.8 %, not very high. The referendum result was that the politicians were given a clear (90 %) popular "NO" to their proposal, and the leading politician chose to resign. However, this time the Internet was only used for chatting. Apparently, the lessons of the success of Kalix-2 were ignored and the political leadership did not proceed at getting what they wanted from the public: its support. Had they used the successful internet based model, they may have come up with a different referendum with a different result.

(2) *Kista*

The agenda setting process within the EU's Cybervote project (www.eucybervote.org) was organized quite differently. "Cybervote" was a research project (partly funded by the European Union) that included representatives from seven European countries. The project was carried out from the year 2001 to the spring of 2003.

Participants represented users, researchers and providers of technology. The focus was originally placed on the development of secure Internet voting software, and this focus remained central to the projects of most of the participating countries during the duration of the main project. However, in the Swedish version, this was complemented by an interest in citizen participation, discussion and agenda setting. Such a social approach varied from all the other nations' part projects, that concentrated on technology.

There were three "user" part projects, one of which was in Sweden. This was carried out in Kista, a northern suburb of Stockholm. It concentrated on citizen involvement in city planning (much like Kalix). Another unique aspect of the Kista part of the Cybervote project was that it only engaged elderly citizens, in an attempt to deal with the "digital divide" between the oldest and the younger generations.

With the help of local organizations of the elderly, invitations were distributed that said: "Do you want to join in the shaping of history?" It mentioned the use of new technologies and the participants were told that they would be instructed in how to use the equipment. This was a general appeal to the senior citizens to get involved in helping develop a new city plan for where they lived.

A sizable group turned up for the first meeting where the discussion centered on a variety of possible project topics to be addressed later. Through this process a list of about a dozen topics emerged. The next step was to get a smaller sample of the participants to use the new technology to go through the list and establish priorities. This included deliberation, plus testing the new secure software. The topics that was agreed on were: (1) Local planning: parks or commercial; (2) public transportation: buses or trains; (3) art and culture: a cultural centre or not. These priorities were then disseminated through printed materials and via the Internet.

Two young researchers carried out a specific study of this part of the project. This showed that these elderly citizens did encounter certain practical problems in using, for them, those new machines, particularly in the voting aspects, but that they appreciated the opportunity to take part in the agenda setting.

The main Kista trial project then took place in January 2003. Everyone who had pre-registered was invited to come to discuss and vote. 236 elderly participants showed up, not enough for any statistical analysis, but more than enough to show an interest in being able to participate in and discuss such an exercise, particularly one with a technological focus. Each person who came was given a password that they could use once at the final vote via the Internet. Their choices concerned the 3 topics listed above, from the earlier agenda setting process. There were discussion facilities available. The final voting was carried out without major problems. The results showed majorities for a green environment, a new train line, and a cultural center. In fact, the participants were very pleased with their experience, and several indicated that they would like to do it again in the future. However, after a political change in local government, interest for a continuation in Kista has declined brusquely. There are indications of interest from other Swedish boroughs. But so far they are very few.

In sum, we believe it can be said that although there also are other Swedish experiments with citizen participation via the internet, these normally concern citizens who are responding to agendas and ideas presented from “higher up”. Citizen participation in the formulation of agendas and priorities is unusual. However, with the success of the Kalix 1 and 2 projects and the Kista project in involving substantial numbers and types of citizens in helping set planning agendas, this may be the beginning of using the Internet for such matters in the Sweden of tomorrow.

American Experiments: Minnesota E-Democracy and “Listening to the City”

Web based forums, chatrooms, bulletin boards and other methods of cyber-discussion are rife in America as well as in Swedish life. A veritable cybergalaxy of them exists to talk about politics alone. Some are facilitated, most are not.

There can be no question that the availability and use of these Internet discussions has had some kind of impact on politics in many countries. What kind and how much, however, is difficult to conceptualize, much less measure with any degree of accuracy. One effect is certain, however: there has been an enormous rise in “political communities”, in America as well as elsewhere, that are just about totally “online.” People from around the globe congregate in cyberspace to talk about and commiserate about everything. In terms of politics, this phenomenon has such effects as mass ventilation of grievances, to massive feelings of being in touch with like minded political thinkers and activists, to massive interchanges between citizens and other citizens about local matters, to massive exchanges between citizens and a vast array of officials.

Does a quantum leap in cyber-discussion for the sake of cyber-discussion on a universe of political matters make a difference in Realpolitik? There is limited knowledge. Does it spur Karl Jung’s “collective subconscious?” No one knows. Does it galvanize mass movements? In some ways and to some degree. Do the most powerful people really care about it? Who really knows? Are “virtual communities” more powerful than geographic, political communities of interest? No one knows. All these are matters that should be of intense political scientific interest, but little has been done to seriously investigate such matters, partly because they are so incredibly hard to operationalize. There have been a number of attempts to address parts of these matters, but the problem is that quantity expands faster than the suggestions for description and solutions.

However, we would like to shed light on two American experiments in cyber-discussion that are worth describing, commenting upon and comparing with the two Swedish experiments above.

(1) *Minnesota E-Democracy*

The first is the oldest by far and the most established. It is called Minnesota E-Democracy and was founded by Steven Clift, who has written and talked about it around the world for years now. In its first incarnation, it was an “election oriented web site” which put position papers from various state office candidates online, “hosted candidate e-debates via email, and launched the MNPOLITICS email discussion list.” The emphasis is laid on election systems support and references. So, what does Clift get out of years of this experience? In his own words: “If ninety nine percent of political discussion on the Internet is junk and disconnected from anything real, then our discussions are half junk”. And as far as genuine measurements are concerned, he notes that “Ongoing academic research and analysis seems sparse, particularly from a quantitative perspective”. Indeed.

The alter ego of this election type forum is a more generalized web discussion called *Minnesota Issues Forum* at www.edemocracy.org/mnpolitics . Basically, this is an electronic, web-based forum, no more or no less. Clift, himself, calls it “a wired agora.” He is critical of the fact that legislators, when online, do not try to get their many isolated emailing constituents together to discuss the issues with other online constituents. It is the interconnection of citizens among themselves, particularly at the neighborhood or town level, that Clift believes is “reconnecting” geographic communities. He calls this the “interactive public commons.” Few know how to judge or measure such phenomena, even fewer know their impact.

Clift states, based on his wealth of experience, that it is very difficult to get people to continue coming into web forums on a regular basis. It usually takes an “explosive” issue

and the best way to recruit recurrent users is via email lists with links to the forums. In ending his comments on the electronic agora, Clift concedes that “We started with the ‘common’ in Minnesota, but in most places local/regional online political communication travels through private email networks and a limited number of public email lists based on specific agencies.” Or as three other researchers on this subject put it: “The crucial question, however, is whether use of these technologies fosters ‘cyber-communities’ that bring people together in sustained civic relationships, as opposed to encouraging fleeting or anonymous social contacts.” (Hale, Musso and Weare 1999, p. 105)

We asked Clift directly (whilst he was in Mongolia discussing these matters) if he could say that he knew of any e-forums having any evident impact on agenda setting or similar policy making in the USA over the past decade. He replied via e-yak, of course, “I think ‘agenda-setting’ is a lot easier to prove than a measure of influence on decisionmaking.” As to proof, he observed that when the present Mayor of Minneapolis announced his candidacy for re-election, he did it online before his press conference. One could say that this kind of inference is about par for the course as far as empirical research is concerned on this topic.

Another online discussion or forum experiment was carried out by *Weblab* as a distinct but integrated part of the “Listening to the City” project in New York City in July 2002. This project, designed and coordinated by *AmericaSpeaks* (www.americaspeaks.org), brought 4,500 citizens who were chosen in a loosely stratified fashion to assemble at the Jacob Javits Center for one day of deliberation over 6 proposals for rebuilding the World Trade Center site as presented by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC). These 6 proposals, with graphics, had been posted on CNN.com and USA Today.com for weeks and colorfully depicted in New York City newspapers as well. Funded by a consortium of civic organizations, the huge forum’s agenda was to see how the citizenry felt about them. An army of media that was

covering the let the general public know what happened on the early evening news and on all their websites.

The instant results were clear and negative. Through an elaborate deliberative process, there was an obvious and thumbs-down response from an overwhelming percentage of those in attendance. But there were also several positive directions that the assemblage agreed upon, i.e., to make the rebuilding of the site (1) less commercial; (2) inspiring; and (3) more of a memorial to those who died there.

Soon thereafter, the LMDC announced, along with statements by the Governor of New York and the Mayor of New York City, that the plans would be scrapped and a whole new process instituted that would adhere to the guidelines set forth by the *AmericaSpeaks* ETM. Actually, according to some observers, the LMDC plans were already “dead on arrival” at the ETM, but that the ETM “crystallized” or was a “watershed event” that made this clear to one and all in one huge media extravaganza.

Even before the event, *WebLab* had been conducting over 30 separate small group online forums on this very same subject as part of the comprehensive ETM that *AmericaSpeaks* had designed. In other words, it was an integral part of the larger process. That the results of the forums would be included in the official *AmericaSpeaks* Report to the LMDC was an important attraction to get participants and to keep them involved in the e-forums. That still begs the main question: Did the e-forums, even as part of the fuller process of “agenda-setting” for a major local/national issue, have any impact on the decision makers whatsoever?

Jed Miller, who was *WebLab*'s coordinator with *AmericaSpeaks*, is not certain. He knows that the results of the forums were definitely included in the official Report. But it was likely not the official Report that convinced the major decision makers to change their mind as much as the f2f ETM plus its widespread media coverage. The

response of officials was almost immediate, they didn't wait to read any report. It was as clear as crystal that the public abhorred their initial proposals from even before the almost unanimous votes at the ETM. In addition, Miller told us that actually the e-forum results differed significantly from the f2f, electronically enhanced public meeting in significant ways.

For example, according to him, there was a much stronger desire for much taller towers ('due to a small but vocal portion of online members') and a much greater resistance to letting the families of those who died have too great a say in what was to replace the WTC. So, ironically, the web forums, albeit a small part of the whole process, came out much closer to predicting (not influencing) the ultimate decision by LMDC—which emphasized having the tallest tower in the world to be built on the site and giving the families of the victims much less of a say than they had at the major event.

In sum, judging from the examples above, we feel we can say that Internet discussions have not even begun to make any real difference in either Sweden or the USA in terms of significantly empowering citizens as agenda-setters, or possibly impacting in other ways on governmental priorities or policies. There may be exceptions here and there, of which we're unaware. Generally, however, we feel that decision makers in representative democracies are extremely hesitant to share power with citizens through the use of the Internet in forums and deliberated discussions... Discussion, yes, but influence or power—precious little.

The few examples given above are not very precise. One place where web-discussions probably have influence is in policy and management decisions by global corporations over secure electronic highways, which possibly may include videoconferencing. These probably have political ramifications, but as far as the average citizen is concerned, they

are iced out virtually and/or really. For the most part, so far, and to be a little provocative, what's out there on "the electronic commons" is a cosmos of unconnected political cyber-chatter that may be informative and therapeutic, but not of great political decision making substance or significance.

We suggest that research for the near future should focus on formal citizen participation during Internet supported deliberative decision making activities. Agenda setting and/or prioritization is one phase that is especially important where web-discussion and voting is a good fit. Voting security and validity need to be sufficiently failsafe.

State of the art web-based public deliberation and Internet voting are key elements to the future of the deliberative democracy movement. Right now, they are far to the rear of that movement's progress. We need to help them catch up through critiques like this, but better yet, by deliberative democratic designs that include the Internet as a major, reliable and effective component in binding governmental decision making. Either they will bind government in some way or not, that's a possible future. Trying to measure their influence in the present and immediate future is an improbable dream.

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