Hal Berghel

Digital Politics 2000

The vote's in: the Web's potential in the political process is still lacking.

In my column four years ago ("Digital Village," Oct. 1996, p. 19), I tried to objectively critique the political uses of cyberspace at that time. My guiding theme remains as timely and appropriate today as then: is there any reason to believe the Internet and cyberspace are having a significant positive effect on the political activities of modern democracies?

Democracies, or at least "Western democracies," are at the same time the most robust and fragile of governments. Their robustness derives from their theoretically broad-based social foundation: all responsible citizens are allowed to participate equally in the political processes of government, via fair and free elections. The electorate becomes enlightened via such freedoms as speech, press, assembly, and the like, and casts its will by majority rule. This power of the majority, constrained by the commonly agreed-upon, persistent "law of the land" of constitutional democracies, is a formidable barrier to both the abuse of power and the tyranny of self-serving minorities—whether political, religious, or ethnic. Government is thus regulated by formal consensus rather than serendipity, tradition, or divine inspiration. Or, at least that's how it's supposed to work.

The fragility of democracies derives from the practical difficulties of keeping the electorate, the Constitution, and the enlightened public opinion in synch. Participatory democracies, with few exceptions, tend not to be all that participatory. In the U.S., for example, participation of half the eligible voters in national elections is a noteworthy event (it was 48.8% in 1996). Furthermore, the voting electorate and the responsible citizens are not coextensive. In addition, elections are not always fair and free, and their outcomes are heavily influenced by monied interests. There are also subtle but effective obstacles to isolating the principles of free speech, press, and assembly from the economic and social realities of the moment. And for all intents and purposes, universal suffrage exists in name only—some groups are consistently underrepresented at the polls. While democracy is a work of art in theory, it is always under stress in practice.

There are some who have claimed the Internet is the ultimate proselytizing agent and protector of democracy—the technological advance with the greatest potential for overcoming the fragility of democracy. I didn't see any evidence of that in 1996. In this column we seek to determine whether anything has changed in the interim.

As I put it in 1996: "…the Internet revolution has the ability to change the nature of political communication from internal, organizational, and private—as it is now—to external, constituent-based, and public. One-way political pronouncements might evolve into two-way political dialogues. Democracy may never be the same again. Perhaps."

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The technological imperative is the use of technology for its own sake with little recognition of whether anything significant is actually being accomplished. As an example, I used Web billboarding, which, in 1996, was in widespread use by national politicians and political parties. The campaign Web sites for the Republican and Democratic parties as they appeared in August are shown in Figures 1 and 2. I welcome you to the challenge of finding potential for genuine interaction in either site (besides, of course, the opportunity to volunteer your time in support of the cause via CGI forms and subscribing to automated email distribution lists).

So, with the possible exception of a few advances in multimedia, little appears to have changed since 1996. We still have a straightforward paradigmatic example of rectified information flow: digital billboarding as an art form. Where the Gore camp has decided to throw in a little animation (for example, the "Bush Debate Duck" window) and a Web Cam (reminiscent of such bandwidth banditry as the Cambridge Coffee Room Coffee Pot of old), the Bush folks throw in the occasional live, online audio feed from a sympathetic voice and a simple-minded CGI trivia game. From a technological point of view, there's nothing that's even pretending to be innovative on either site. In 1996 I said: "After visiting a few hundred political Web sites, the adjective 'uninspired' comes to mind." Nothing has changed but a few extensions in the gratuitous use of multimedia.

Figure 1. Gore/Lieberman Web site.

The same can be said, incidentally, for the Green Party's Web site (www.greenparty.org) and Pat Buchanan's Web site (www.buchanan.org) with the exception that the Buchanan Web site designers seem to be among the last to figure out that organizing Web pages with linear lists isn't scalable (the site's scroll bar will run you right off your mousepad). Another thing I found interesting about this site is that it links to a Reform Party Web site (www.reform-party-usa.org). The humor value of Buchanan's site linking to a political party Web site that disavows any recognition of his candidacy should not be overlooked.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention that the Whitehouse home page (www.whitehouse.gov—be careful with the top-level domain name or you're in for a real eye-opener!) has taken a distinct turn for the better in the past four years. Freed of its gratuitous Java applet of an unfurled flag fluttering in the virtual, digital breeze and the cutesy CGI welcome, which not only changed from "good morning," to "good afternoon," to "good evening," throughout the day, but also

changed—according to the time of day—the level of illumination behind the Whitehouse (that, incidentally, only worked correctly in one time zone), it has now taken on a minimalist beauty of its own. It is worth comparing the current home page with its ancestor reproduced in my 1996 column. It may have cost the taxpayers a few million dollars to bring the Whitehouse Web staff to the level of understanding they could have achieved by requesting a single-paragraph review from Jakob Nielsen, but progress is progress at any cost, I guess.

As I pointed out in 1996, sitting politicians have an enormous advantage in using public-domain resources (for example, portrait galleries of former presidents with attached biographies, guides to federal services and resources, and access to an array of public documents, among others) to enhance the content of their "government-cum-political-overtones" sites. As I said before, "the advantages of incumbency will apply to cyberspace as they do in other aspects of political life." So I guess we shouldn't be surprised.

Figure 2. Bush/Cheney Web site

Phantom Participation

In 1996 I was concerned that the Web would become the inexpensive propaganda vehicle of choice for modern pols. I observed, "An exciting new technology like the Web is simply too much for a politician to overlook. Attracted to the hype like moths to flame, politicians throughout the computerized world seek to establish a presence on the Web—in many cases before they connect their offices to the Internet." Any change in political attitude since then has eluded me.

I still see no compelling evidence that the Web and Internet are enlarging the size of the informed electorate or edifying the body politic. This is not to deny that the body of information available to the electorate via the Nets has increased by an order of magnitude or two, but the content remains persuasive and biased rather than enlightening. We seem to be porting the same old tired political rhetoric from the placard, bumper sticker, poster, and sound bites over to today's Web billboards, political screen savers, and streaming video. The medium has changed, but not the nature and shallow content of the message.

Last time, I identified three potential problems with the use of the Web and Internet as a propaganda vehicle (listed from least to most threatening):

1. The proliferation of junk email
2. The automation of spin-doctoring
3. The elevation of the noise level in political discourse

One good thing about digital politics in 2000 is that political junk mail seems from my vantage

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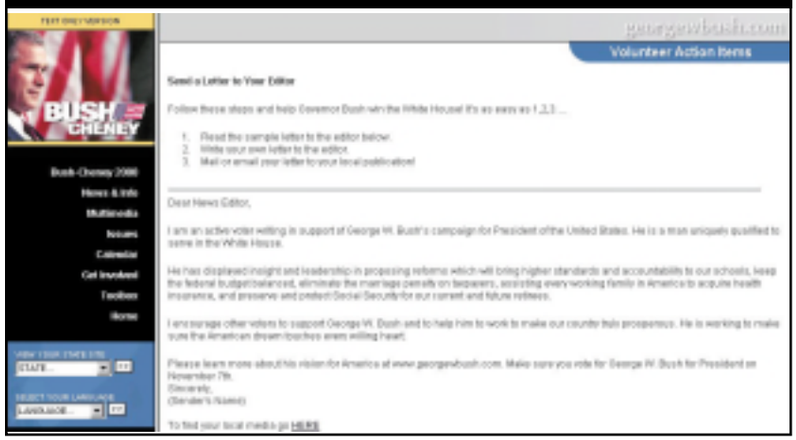
point less of a problem than I imagined. I take this as a positive sign. I have never registered my email address with any political organization, and have so far never received any information from them. It is worth noting in this regard that I'm generalizing from a sample size of one, so many of you may have very different experiences.

However, automated spin-doctoring is taking place as I predicted. For example, click on the Bush site's "Action Items" pop-up window, "Send a letter to your Editor" option (see Figure 3). Note the "canned" letter. Just imagine the absurdity of the op-ed page of your newspaper filled with *n* tokens of this same letter, each bearing the name of a different author. This idea has to be targeted for a constituency of room-temperature IQs. Overcome by a willingness to make a positive contribution, I herewith propose the innovative concept of "political spin numerology (PSN)" whereby each editor assigns a unique code to each hyperlinked, canned letter—"Bushwhack 407b9," "Goreibund A9v" and build the running tallies into their op-ed pieces. Imagine William Safire saying "…who among us would consider 419 'Bushwhack 64s' as compelling in the light of 300 'Goreibund 9s' against a backdrop of 100 solid 'Hillary 36b7s.'" The potential for rhetorical parsimony is truly inspiring.

Although I am not willing to personally verify the presence of automated spin via "personalization" or "clustering" Web services, the CGI required is trivial once one builds in a mechanism for clustering subscribers (see Figure 4). I would be astounded if subscribers to the personalization services appearing on this year's political Web sites didn't automatically trigger "boilerplate" email feeds via automatically created distribution lists. This is a temptation a politician would find incapable of resisting.

As far as the noise level is concerned, events proceeded as predicted. Political rhetoric doesn't scale well, and more is almost never better. I illustrated this point with a challenge to bring to one's mind the most personally compelling political speeches. For most of us, we can count them on our fingers. That may be one of the reasons for negative political campaigns; it's easy to produce in large quantities versus the finely crafted, incontrovertible argument. All the available evidence suggests to me that electioneering on the Web in 2000 is even more mired in propagandizing than its 1996 progenitor.

Figure 3. An editor's nightmare: automated spin of the "canned feedback" ilk.



The Case for Optimism (Revisited)

Four years ago, I held out the hope that "politicians will eventually come to understand that the potential of the Web resides in interactivity and in the possibility of greater individual participation in the political process." I gave a

Figure 4. Automated spin-doctoring 2000—boilerplate spam for every socioeconomic group.

few examples of where digital politics could lead us.

First, it is possible, nay trivial, to digitize the political memory and achieve unparalleled political accountability. Every vote, speech, press release, and source of campaign funds, could be cross-indexed by topic, theme, political bias, outcome, benefactor, constituency, source, and so forth. While I'm still optimistic, I must confess dismay at the snail-like pace with which we are proceeding.

The U.S. government's contribution, Thomas (thomas.loc.gov), is one lesson in frustration. Although raw-data sites of this sort should be maintained by the government, they are of little use to the electorate. Their value lies primarily in the fact that an industrious reporter can gather background data on Congressional activities without having to travel to the Library of Congress. However, for the hoi polloi interested in discovering revealing patterns, trends, and correlations, forget it. There is nothing in Thomas that will ratchet digital politics to the next level of scrutiny and awareness.

More revealing, though too-often biased and self-serving, are the private sites. These can range from the scandalous (Skeleton Closet—www.realchange.org) to the stately (Voter.Com—www.voter.com). In the long run, such sites will provide the long-term payoff, for it is here the public will be made aware of the pork-barrel projects, the log rolls, the paired voting habits, patronage appointments, and the entire cornucopia of political abuses of our fragile democracies. Of course, the open question is "where will the money come from to support these sites, and how much influence will the source of funding have on the objectivity of reporting?" While my hope that by now the Web and the Internet would be a useful tool to the investigative reporter has been crushed, things are moving, however slowly, in the right direction. Based upon the present pace, I project a digitization of the political memory that is convenient and useful to the informed electorate sometime before the next millennium.

A second hopeful sign would be the animation of political communication, particularly through teleconferencing. I had in mind digital "town halls." In this area, we've made little progress beyond moderated chat groups. On this front, I have no grounds for optimism to report.

Another opportunity is to use Internet and Web technology to add some participation to our participatory democracy. In order for this to happen, I envisioned bi-directional (rather than rectified) information flow between politicians and constituents in the form of personalized email responses (versus boilerplate and form letters), automated reviewing and follow-up of the way such communications were conducted, dynamic interaction between constituent and office staff, and so forth. I regret to report that I see politicians making no more effort to enfranchise constituents, encourage their participation in the political dia-

logue, or act on their input than I did in 1996.

Finally, I suggested the Internet and the Web offered us a fresh approach at the electoral process. "Friction-free" voting could have a major impact on both the nature of the political process and the outcome. Although limited experimentation has been conducted with digital voting (see the special issue on Voting Technology, *Communications*, Dec. 1999), there is little positive to report as of this writing. Most disappointing is the lack of recognition that electronic voting, even if uncorruptable, is still not electronic democracy; the actual voting is but a small part of the democratic process.

As an aside, one of the new twists to digital politics that hadn't occurred to me in 1996 is real-time polling. This has become quite the rage in 2000. Sites such as Portrait of America (www.portraitofamerica.com), Gallup Polls (www.gallup.com), and Zogby (www.zogby.com) provide a continuous stream of polling results to the ready consumer.

Still not a Panacea

I still stand by my concluding remarks in 1996: "Of course the digitization of politics will not be a panacea. It will not just reduce or eliminate current political problems, it will also spawn new ones. This is the inevitable price we pay for technological advance. As the automobile contributed to the homogeneity of nations, it also facilitated the growth of the suburbs and the eventual decay of the inner cities. The great challenge before society is to ensure that the new problems are easier to deal with than the old."

Digital politics may also contribute to the balkanization of the electorate. The ease in which electronic communities may form would actually tend to encourage this since geographical constraints are absent in cyberspace. As these digital enclaves spawn, new strategies will develop to nurture consensus.

It also remains to be seen whether, or to what extent, virtual communities will figure into digital politics. My observations are neutral in this regard. We are looking at digital politics through the lens of technological capability as it augments a traditional political process. There is another perspective that derives from the study of society and online social movements. Studies into the nature of online interpersonal and group relationships, and the degree to which these relationships are sustainable in cyberspace, are also relevant but beyond assessment. For answers to these and other pressing problems we must ultimately turn to sociology and psychology.

I significantly underestimated the rest inertia of the political systems to embrace the new network technologies and experiment with innovative ways in which they can be used to improve the quality of the political process. I hope I have more encouraging observations to share in 2004, but I'm not optimistic. C

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