Grassroots Democracy and the Internet: The Telecommunications Policy Roundtable -- Northeast USA (TPR-NE)

Hans K. Klein
hkklein@mit.edu

Abstract

Insights about using the Internet for grassroots democracy can be gained from the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable -- Northeast (TPR-NE), a public interest coalition in Boston. TPR-NE used the Internet as a discussion forum, a low-cost communication medium, a distributor of expert information, and a tool for maintaining collective enthusiasm in dispersed groups. The Internet supports citizens’ associations, which are vital institutions for democracy.

1. Introduction

Democracy is a communications-intensive mode of governance. Legislators propose and discuss policies. Citizens and industry groups voice their concerns to their representatives. Researchers analyze the historical effects of past policies and the likely impacts of future ones. In the democratic process there is continual discussion, analysis, debate, and study.

Any technology that changes communication has the potential to change the practice of democracy. The printing press, radio, television, and the facsimile machine have all in their time affected democracy. Today, the Internet has the potential to effect change.

How will the Internet affect democratic practice? This paper sheds light on that issue by examining one case of grassroots democratic activism. Since 1994 a group called the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable -- Northeast (TPR-NE) has sought to promote the public interest in telecommunications policy. In bringing together non-profit and public-interest groups in the Boston area, the group used the Internet extensively. By examining how TPR-NE used the Internet for grassroots democracy, general lessons can be gained.

2. Telecommunications and the TPR-NE

Telecommunications reform has been a top priority in the U.S. Congress in recent years. For the first time since 1934, Congress is trying to restructure the regulatory framework that defines who can provide communications services under what competitive conditions. The biggest stakeholders in this legislation alecommunications companies like AT&T, regional Bell operating companies (RBOCs), and cable television companies.

The new regulations have many public interest implications as well. The issues are numerous. Reliance on market mechanisms could lead to "information redlining," in which economically disadvantaged neighborhoods of little interest to vendors are effectively denied vital information services. Existing non-profit organizations might be threatened. For example, public access television, which provides free video training and cablecasting in cities throughout the U.S., could lose its funding from local cable monopolies if Congress modifies the regulations. Federal legislation also offers opportunities for proactive change. It could guarantee low-cost access to communications by schools, governments, and non-profits.

These issues attracted the notice of the public interest community first in Washington, D.C., and then elsewhere in the country. In 1993 a number of Washington-based non-profits and public interest groups createalled the Telecommunication Policy Roundtable. Among the early members were Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) and the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), the Center for Media Education, the Taxpayer Assets Project, the American Library Association, OMB Watch, and many others. Participants met monthly to hear reports of new developments and to promote cooperation among the different participants.

One year later, in the summer of 1994, a grassroots version of this roundtable formed in Boston. This was the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable -- Northeast (TPR-NE). Like the national roundtable, the TPR-NE sought to join non-profits and public interest groups to exchange information and promote common positions on issues in federal legislation. The TPR-NE sought to complement the Washington group by raising the same issues with local groups and by contacting Massachusetts legislators directly in their home districts.

In the course of 1994 and into 1995, the activities of the TPR-NE developed in three stages. In the first stage, in the fall of 1994, efforts focused on internal organizational activities of attracting participants defining an action plan. Building participation was facilitated by earlier contacts from a recent CPSR conference on the theme of "Developing an Open and Equitable Information Infrastructure."[1] The most active participants came from a few local organizations, most notably the Boston chapter of CPSR, Citizens for Political Participation and Action (CPPAX, a local activist organization), Emerson College (a local college specializing ions), Boston Neighborhood Network (the city's public access television station), and the Center for Information, Technology, and Society. Additional participants came from WGBH (Boston's Public Broadcasting Service affiliate), community computing networks, and school educators. Surprisingly, local libraries did not participate despite their stake in information policy. Meeting on a biweekly basis, this group planned an action strategy based on public education through a series of issue forums.

In its next stage of development, TPR-NE performed public education. From November 1994 through April 1995, TPR-NE hosted a series of public forums on policy issues in telecommunications. The topics covered were: access to information infrastructure; journalism on the Internet; libraries' and towns' use of information infrastructure; draft legislation before Congress; and healthcare and information infrastructure. Each forum consisted of a panel of about five speakers, and each was videotaped and cablecast on public access television stations around the U.S. Attendance at these events exceeded expectations, at one point consisting of some two hundred people. Through these activities TPR-NE earned high visibility in the Boston area. That visibility then allowed it to move to the third stage of activity.

In the spring of 1995 TPR-NE made direct contact with policy-makers. A delegation from TPR-NE visited the offices of those Massachusetts Congressmen most active in telecommunications policy, including Senators Kennedy and Kerry and Congressman Markey. In each visit about an hour was spent discussing issues of access to information, information redlining, public access television, and Internet pricing.

Shortly after the visit to Senator Kerry's office, the Congressman successfully amended proposed Senate legislation in support of public access television. Although that step was almost certainly not the direct effect of TPR-NE's actions, the fact that home constituents had expressed concern may have reinforced the decision to act.

Thus in less than one year the TPR-NE had established itself as the focal point for grassroots telecommunications policy activism in the Boston area. With a core group of about one dozen participating organizations and hundreds of people attending its forums, TPR-NE could legitimately claim to be a voice for the public interest. It had provided public forums where issues were discussed and where local groups could inform themselves of their stake in telecommunications reform. It had voiced concerns of public interest issues to Massachusetts legislators. And it continues to exist to this day, ready to act when regulatory decisions arise at the national or the state level.

3. Use of the Internet

In all stages of its activity, the TPR-NE used the Internet heavily. Without doubt this greatly contributed to its effectiveness.

One the earliest concrete steps taken in grassroots organizing was the creation of an Internet listserv to serve as a common discussion forum. 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. This allowed for group discussion in which everyone could talk to everyone. (The listserv address is tpr-ne@mitvma.mit.edu .)

With the passage of time, communication on the listserv stabilized on a few areas. First, it was heavily used for information dissemination. Minutes of meetings, reviews of forums, and information obtained from other sources were all posted to the entire group. When draft legislation appeared in Washington, for example, the text was posted to the listserv for all to examine. Second, the listserv was used for administrative coordination, particularly to arrange meeting times. Use of the listserv rendered this mundane and very time-consuming chore much easier. Finally, the listserv was used for public announcements of forums. Since the number of subscribers soon reached into the hundreds, this was an inexpensive and fairly effective way to reach the concerned public. With no budget of its own, TPR-NE relied on the listserv (together with some phone calls and free newspaper announcements) to spread the word of its events.

Interestingly, the listserv was not heavily used for discussions of policy. In-depth discussions took place much more at the bi-weekly face-to-face meetings. Thus the Internet forum was used more for mundane tasks of information broadcast and administration than for deliberative policy discussions.

Within six months, the structure of the listserv was modified in reaction to emerging usage patterns. The one listserv became three: one for "internal" administration, one for general information, and one for public announcements. The internal listserv was reserved for core participants who regularly attended planning meetings; it provided a less-public forum to discuss sensitive issues of fundraising and self-evaluation. The general TPR-NE listserv continued to distribute mail from anyone who cared to post a message. Finally, the public announcements listserv provided a minimum-traffic forum, transmitting only official announcements of meetings and events. This three-tiered structure corresponded to three general classes of participants: core volunteers, general participants and forum attendees, and distant listeners who wanted to follow events but not read much mail.

By spring of 1995 the general listserv had some two hundred and fifty subscribers. Many of them were people outside the Boston area who were interested in the activities of the TPR-NE. Some of these listeners even launched similar roundtables in other cities, most notably in Cincinatti and San Diego. The listserv was not only a useful organizing tool, but also TPR-NE's biggest public service. Subscribers to it could keep informed of both local and national developments in telecommunications.

4. Lessons About the Internet

TPR-NE's experiences offer some general lessons about the advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet for grassroots activism. The advantages fall into four categories: 1) the communication pattern, 2) cost, 3) types of information, and 4) psychology.

By far the most important feature of the Internet is the communication pattern that it makes possible. On the Internet many people can talk to many people. This is the fundamental communication pattern in democracy. Historically, this many-to-many communication has been realized through the institution of the meeting hall or forum, in which citizens assemble to discuss issues affecting all of them and to decide on joint action. Much of the work of grassroots activism consists in assembling groups of people with common concerns and communicating with each other to formulate a common agenda. With the Internet, such discussion could take place without everyone assembling at one site. No other existing communication technology allows for this pattern of communication. The provision of many-to-many communication is the Internet's most explicitly political characteristic.

Granted, the experiences of TPR-NE showed that the Internet complements but does not replace face-to-face interactions. Substantive discussions still required real rather than virtual meetings. Nonetheless, the less important discussions of schedules and information sharing could be done on-line, allowing more important work to be handled on a face-to-face basis.

The second, and related, advantage of the Internet was that it reduced costs associated with grassroots organizing. Setting a common meeting time for even ten people can be an onerous task on the telephone. Announcing a public forum to hundreds of people, be it by telephone or facsimile, can also consume many hours and incur high costs. Even when other technologies cost little, their use requires much time. By using the Internet, the costs of these mundane transactions were dramatically lowered. For a volunteer group like TPR-NE, the reduced demand on members' time and budget made the difference between success and failure.

A third benefit of the Internet was the information that it rendered accessible. Original documents and expert analyses were easily obtained. Draft legislation in the Senate became available in Boston almost as fast as in Washington. Occasionally, analyses from newspapers or trade journals were scanned into electronic format and circulated.

Without the Internet, this information would have been nearly impossible to obtain. With the Internet, a grassroots group had access to much of the same information as professional lobbyists in the nation's capital.

Finally, the Internet had important psychological effects. First, it maintained a sense of community among dispersed individuals who only saw each other infrequently. In the early weeks, when participants were few and concrete activities non-existent, communication on the Internet kept spirits up. By interacting frequently on-line a sense of continuity and community developed, and there was a shared perception of relevance and productivity. That perception became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as individuals worked together to develop specific events. Without such frequent on-line interaction, a sense of isolation and futility might easily have set in.

A second psychological aspect of the Internet facilitated organizing was the degree of intimacy that it offered. Interaction was close enough to promote a sense of community, even with people that one never met personally. Yet it was not invasive. Unsolicited electronic mail and "cold call" inquiries were not disruptive. Thus the intimacy of electronic mail was appropriate to both maintain the TPR-NE community and to bring in new participants.

Not everything about the Internet was good, however. In using the technology, some weaknesses also became apparent.

First, the Internet made grassroots democratic activism easier -- but not easy. In overcoming some of the biggest obstacles to collective action, it quickly revealed secondary obstacles. No amount of communication could compensate for a simple lack of interest by certain groups. Boston-area libraries could not be convinced to participate actively in TPR-NE, and no amount of Internet communication could change that. This stood in marked contrast to California and Washington, for instance, where libraries participated quite actively.

Second, the Internet could not take the place of face-to-face meetings. An electronic forum proved adequate for exchanging and even discussing relatively well-defined information. However, face-to-face meetings were essential for brainstorming and for reaching consensus on agendas. Such unstructured discussions could not be effectively carried out over a text-based system. Bi-weekly meetings remained essential.

Where face-to-face contact was not possible, collaboration was less effective. For instance, close cooperation with groups in Washington was only achieved by individuals who regularly traveled there to attend meetings.

Another very serious problem was the limited diffusion of Internet technology. Some participants at early meetings did not have access to Internet accounts, and they frequently missed meetings or could not follow developments. Although an attempt was made to regularly fax out copies of electronic mailings, the time demands of this task led to its termination. Clearly, broad access to the Internet is an urgent priority to enable true grassroots participation.

A final problem arose specifically from using Internet. The crea

described above, the creation of a class structure within TPR-NE. The "internal" listserv tended to formalize membership in the core group, so that important information was only shared among those insiders.

It is common in volunteer activity that over time a core group of committed individuals emerges. Those individuals may find that they communicate more frequently and they may address more sensitive issues. As a result, they may communicate among themselves and away from the larger group of more casual participants. On the Internet, however, this pattern of communication necessitated a new listserv with an explicitly-defined subscribers list. That formalized the membership of the insider subgroup more than would have occurred in face-to-face communications. It made explicit and durable a division among participants that would have better remained informal and fluid. Fortunately, this undesirable trend was quickly recognized and corrected through a conscious effort to use the internal listserv less. Discussion of meeting times and general concerns moved back to the general listserv. Nonetheless, to the extent that the Internet requires the formalization of communication patterns, it risks creating divisions among groups, and this problem is likely to appear in any group that uses the technology.

In summary, the Internet greatly facilitated TPR-NE's grassroots democratic activities. The pattern of communication on a listserv matched the needs for a democratic forum for discussion. The Internet's low cost allowed TPR-NE to function on a shoestring budget of time and money. Original documents and expert analyses became much more accessible. And at the level of psychology, a sense of community and enthusiasm developed among participants despite a lack of personal contact. Granted other problems remained, most notably the exclusion of people not on the Internet. Overall, however, the technology greatly enhanced the functioning of the group.

5. Reflections on Democracy in America

So what does this tell us about the effect of the Internet on the practice of democracy? The essential insight here is that the Internet is an *associative technology*. As many theorists on democracy have noted, associations play a crucial role in the functioning of democracy. By facilitating association, the Internet strengthens democracy.

The democratic theorist whose views offer the conceptual framework for the Internet is Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America*. For Tocqueville, the central problem of democracy is the simultaneous creation of an atomized citizenry and a central state. The tendency of community ties to weaken as individual equality increases leads to political apathy and the loss of democratic control over the state. Public apathy and is caused by what he calls "individualism," that is, citizens' exclusive focus on their own material well-being: "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."[2] As citizens' interest in governance declines, the state is freed from public oversight. That allows it to act with a free hand in public affairs. The result is a decline in effective democracy and an increase in autonomous state action -- what Tocqueville terms "despotism."

This trend toward atomization and state autonomy can be countered, however. Democracy can function if citizens form associations. Associations, in which groups of citizens unite together to pursue some common cause, can overcome the pernicious effects of excessive individualism. Associations foster a continued awareness of the public interest and of each citizen's role in public affairs. They prevent the apathy that allows democracy to turn into despotism. "If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased."[2] Therefore, the formation of associations is vital to the health of a democratic society.

Tocqueville notes that communication technology plays an essential role in the formation of associations. Through shared communication dispersed individuals can achieve collective action. In a society of atomized individuals, "means must be found to converse every day without seeing one another, and to take steps in common without having met." [2] The primary communication technology in his time (1840) was the printing press and, therefore, Tocqueville identifies a "necessary" connection between public associations and newspapers. The real point, however, is that associations require a communication technology that allows all members to communicate among themselves. Without it associations would be unworkable and democracy would likely succumb to the despotism of an autonomous state.

Clearly, the properties of the Internet noted surpass even those of association. The Internet is a truly associative technology, allowing dispersed citizens to converse and to take steps in common. Whereas a newspaper is a broadcast technology, transmitting information from one source to many readers, the Internet allows for the lateral communications characteristic of associations. By facilitating association, it has the potential to empower individuals and to promote greater democratic oversight on government.

Today's democracy in America could benefit from such a technology. Although few U.S. citizens would call their government "despotic," there is little doubt that many governmental decisions go forward with minimal public scrutiny. As the analyses of campaign finance laws by the public interest group Common Cause clearly show, non-representative moneyed interests exert an enormous influence on governmental decision-making.[3] Greater citizen involvement in public affairs could reduce this effect. The Internet's ability to facilitate association could lead to an increase in citizen participation and oversight of government.

In closing, a few predictions and recommendations can be offered about the Internet and grassroots democracy. Today the technology offers more power than has been exploited, so many new applications can be expected to emerge. The first to use these will probably be existing associations that want to increase the cohesiveness among members. For example, public access television stations around the U.S. are only now beginning to explore the how they can share information in order to improve their effectiveness. Their ability to present a common voice in national politics should increase dramatically, as should their ability to perform internal tasks like pooling television programming among stations.

New associations are also likely to appear. At the very local level the Internet’s impact should be quite powerful; neighborhood associations will probably flourish as people discover the ability to address common concerns like crime, public services, and property transactions (and gossip!) Ultimately, local governments may be the most impacted by an increase in grassroots associations.

Finally, the most pressing task in promoting grassroots democracy is to diffuse Internet technology. The major barriers lie less in public policy or economics than in simply teaching people how to use the technology. As individuals and community centers learn about the technology and then begin applying it in their activities, a broad array of creative uses can be expected to appear.

The Internet is a powerful technology for grassroots democracy. The experiences of the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable -- Northeast (TPR-NE) illustrate its power as a discussion forum, a low-cost communication medium, a distributor of expert information, and a tool for maintaining collective enthusiasm in dispersed groups. It is an associative technology. By facilitating discussion and collective action by citizens, it strengthens democracy. As entrepreneurs find new applications and as more people learn to use the technology, existing associations will be strengthened and new associations are likely to appear.

References

[1] "Developing an Equitable and Open Information Infrastructure," *Conference Proceedings, DIAC-94, Directions and Implications of Advanced Computing*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 1994, Computer ProfSocial Responsibility (CPSR), Palo Alto, California.

[2] Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), pp. 104, 118, 120.

[3] Wertheimer, Fred, "How Money Beat ‘Change’" *The Washington Post*, 16 October 1994.

Author Information

Hans K. Klein is the New England Director of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility and Leader of the Policy Track at INET ’95. He currently complet

Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Program in Technology, Management, and Policy. His current address is: 301 Huron Ave., Cambridge, MA, 02138, USA.