

The Use of the Internet for Civic Engagement:  
A View from Blacksburg, Virginia

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All democratic institutions -- especially local, state and federal government -- are facing a common opportunity and a common dilemma. That is, how to take advantage of computer networks, such as, the Internet, to increase citizen involvement in democratic processes without overloading the existing system with unmanageable input.

The community network of the Blacksburg Electronic Village --or BEV -- is in the process of designing, developing and testing innovative applications and services aimed at increasing civic participation in local governance and decision-making in town and county government. These new communication services include:

- discussion groups organized around topics on the agendas of the School Board, Town Council, and Board of Supervisors, moderated by staff of these organizations, and
- searchable, digitized video databases of the television broadcasts of Town Council meetings which include built-in online feedback buttons.

The most unique application of computer networking and community networks derives from the capability they provide for small group participation and community engagement. Other applications, such as accessing information or sending messages to individuals has existed for many years in other forms, whether obtained from printed materials, public libraries, mass media (radio, TV, newspapers) or interpersonal media, such as letters, and the telephone.

Computer networks, such as the Internet, allow interaction among groups of people which have the potential in geographic communities of restoring “a political dynamic of an earlier time” as Ithiel de Sola Pool put it. The quality of life in a community with a lot of social engagement is higher than the quality of life in a community where it is low. The question is, “Is it possible to build social trust, norms of mutual reciprocity and social networks over the Internet, particularly in geographic communities?”

## **Overview**

Over the past several decades, there has been a decline in both civic engagement and in social capital -- the norms of mutual reciprocity, the social trust and social networks needed to achieve common objectives (Putnam 1995b). Since 1965, the amount of time Americans spend in local clubs is down by one half. Surveys of collective attendance at meetings between 1973 and 1993 show a decrease of 36%; attendance at town meetings is down 39%. The number of Americans working for political parties dropped 56%.

Putnam links the decline in civic engagement to decreasing social capital and attributes both to the electronic revolution, especially television. He argues we need to meet in groups in the same physical space in order to strengthen connectivity and social networks that help us achieve social goals. But do we?

Other writers point to computer networking as a medium that can facilitate small group participation (Neuman 1991, Rheingold 1994). They argue that interactive media facilitate horizontal communications within the citizenry, and that civic participation facilitated by computer networking may restore the “political dynamic of an earlier time” (Ithiel de Sola Pool 1983). Rather than being a substitute for human connectivity, computer communications may well enhance an individual’s involvement in and sense of belonging to a community, and inspire him or her to attend a face-to-face meeting.

A study by Georgia Tech (GVU survey) of web users in the US and Europe between April and May 1996 found that:

“Web users show a strong interest in political issues: 92% are registered to vote and 60% participated in the most recent elections in their respective countries. Over 40% report that they are more involved with political issues since coming online.”<sup>1</sup>

We expect that the number of people who participate in discussions of community issues will increase, because more people will have access to a convenient medium (email vs postal mail) and the information structures

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1

(newsgroups, moderated listservs, etc) to accommodate discussion. What we don't know is whether people will feel more attached and involved in their community because they engage with other members in problem-solving via online groups.

We also do not know whether online discussion actually helps to foster increases in face-to-face participation at public meetings.

What we do know is that if computer networking is a medium that can help increase community participation, it will not do this by itself. We, as citizens and community leaders must create the "structures" and the "space" - a virtual commons -- within which discussion can flourish. We must cultivate group participation by moderating discussion, updating content, archiving conference discussions, and organizing information into dynamic, usable, and readily accessible, material full of feedback options.

### **Blacksburg Electronic Village**

The Blacksburg Electronic Village is a formal partnership between the Town of Blacksburg, Bell Atlantic-Virginia, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech). BEV is committed to the development and delivery of high capacity network services throughout an entire rural county, including the town of Blacksburg, in the foothills of Appalachia. In addition to standard Internet services, current BEV services include information and web-based forms for local town and county government,

social services, public education, libraries, health care, and commercial services.

The initial effort to connect the citizens of Blacksburg together and to the world has been a huge success. More than half of the community is directly on the Internet at home, school, or work. Every day, thousands of people use the BEV home page on the World Wide Web as a jumping off place to obtain services and information.

We have seen in Blacksburg that the community network is clearly capable of building social trust and the norms of mutual reciprocity needed to achieve collective action. By definition, a community network helps build social networks by providing another medium for interaction and communication. From the outset of the project, users expressed their interest and satisfaction in being able to be more connected to their community. Seventy-two percent (72%) of BEV survey respondents report they expect the Internet to be somewhat or very helpful with civic affairs (Patterson and Kavanaugh1996). Eighty six percent (86%) indicate they are somewhat or very interested in bulletin boards and newsgroups.

Rather than being a substitute for human connectivity, networks can enhance an individual's involvement in and sense of belonging to a community. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of survey respondents report they expect BEV to be somewhat or very helpful in social relations.

### **Opportunity Lost**

But the BEV and many other community networks have failed to figure out exactly how to leverage the potential of networking to increase civic engagement. The Town of Blacksburg reports that it receives many email notes suggesting changes and additions to their government information, but to date, this dialogue has been on a one-to-one basis, rather than a discussion group.

While there is ample local government information online, there is very little *communication* (via email, newsgroups, conference lists, etc.) between government and citizens, or among citizens interested in issues of civic responsibility. It is our contention that networking has the potential to increase civic participation in governance, but that potential can be achieved only when services and content are organized and managed for the purpose of fostering online group participation by citizens.

We believe these potential discussion groups will remain a distant promise without dedicated staff in the community whose primary role is to manage and foster online civic engagement together with the organizational support and commitment to identifying effective procedures.

We currently have in place:

Town government Web pages with built-in electronic mail for citizen feedback to specific Departments

A school board mailing list (Jim Klagge)

Email addresses for each School Board member

County Government uses advanced Web technology developed by the BEV to facilitate informal referenda and polls on topics of interest to local citizens (e.g., the smart road, school board budgets, town planning issues, location of bikeways, etc). These referenda are authenticated by the server to ensure there is one person, one vote.

Citizens and public officials use an online database (such as the BEV HistoryBase) as a tool to record significant community events.

We envision:

More intensive use of tried and true Internet information services to support civic and community dialogue; for example:

- Increased use of email mailing lists to support dialogue on civic issues.
- Better use of Usenet groups for community discussion, and cross-linking mailing lists and Usenet groups for broader participation.
- Broader use of chat services (such as, Internet Relay Chat or IRC, Palace, and Web-chat) to support carefully focused and scheduled online meetings to discuss specific issues and topics.
- Extensive, broad-based training to ensure citizens have the skills and expertise needed to effectively use the new channels for civic communication.

Network learning and teaching experiments (such as the Cyberschool at Virginia Tech) suggest that online chats are most effective with:

- A moderator/discussion leader

- A single topic for discussion

- A scheduled time and fixed length

A government staff member could be a single point of contact for all online communications with citizens. This person will have direct and regular access to all departmental managers and high level town meetings, and have the responsibility to ensure that all online communications from citizens are routed to right town staff person or group, such as the Town Council.

In Blacksburg, discussions are underway with the Town Planning Department regarding experimentation with online neighborhood meetings on zoning and special use permits. There are currently 40-50 of these neighborhood meetings per year, and the goal is to increase participation through online services.

### **Importance of Training and Education**

We believe that the low use of online discussion tools can be linked to the lack of training. Most people have sent and received paper-based mail, but few people have any experience with the one-to-many and the many-to-many communications modes of online tools like Usenet News and discussion groups. Online chat rooms have been very popular because the

idea of a group of people “talking” in a “room” is simple to understand.

However, we believe that the potential of chats in the context of community development remains to be tapped.

The Town of Blacksburg sees great potential in using scheduled chats as a way of making town officials more accessible to a busy citizenry and as a way of obtaining more and better information about how to manage town resources. In Blacksburg, the network technology and infrastructure is in place to support this kind of dialogue, and a critical mass of citizens exist with access to the network.

What is missing is an education and training program to ensure that citizens and town employees know how to use these tools effectively and understand the potential for themselves, for meaningful dialogue on local issues, and for enhancing the effectiveness of local civic groups.

Training is accomplished in a variety of settings: the public library and K-12 schools, local community college or university classes, the YMCA, private companies. Additional support and training can come in other ways; for example:

- The BEV group and the public library provide Web space for community groups.
- A BEV staff member is managing a volunteer program to match local people with good online skills to help others with installation, setup, and troubleshooting of computers and networking.

- A BEV staff member is assisting volunteers with Web page design skills to assist civic groups in the design and development of community Web pages.
- The local public television access channel, WTOB, is working with the BEV to develop a series of video-based training programs for delivery on public access cable TV and by videotape.

The BEV project also seeks to assist other communities interested in establishing community networks, and in increasing civic participation. We will be making available online a complete set of documentation, how-to materials and training guides for other communities and groups interested in solving the problems of increasing civic participation in ways that can be accommodated and incorporated effectively into the work of governance.

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