Politics on the Net: A Three-Way Digital Divide

BY CHRISTINA KOUKKOS

Activism-in-a-box

While a candidate creates and runs on a platform for people to vote on in a winner-take-all election, the platform that wins rarely reflects all the nuances of the opinions and priorities of those who voted for it. The real world works more like a market, where the idea that wins does not do so to the exclusion of its opposite (or its cousin).

At their best, developers of activist technology encourage a lightly regulated marketplace of opinions and stances.

Meetup.com is helping individuals with similar interests to find each other locally, and now to formalize themselves and connect with larger national or international networks around each interest. MoveOn is helping progressive activists coalesce around political issues or stances and take action. Web Lab and one of its clients, America*Speaks*, combine clever technology, knowledge about group dynamics and a deep understanding of the governance process to squeeze change out of rigid political systems.

Web Lab: Small group dynamics

Congratulations! Your guy won the election. Now what? Involvement in political campaigns may serve as a catalyst for continued involvement in community affairs, but it's pretty obvious that, other than hard-core political junkies, few citizens are likely to remain involved in national politics past the election. For better or worse, it's easier for people to justify getting involved in local governance than in abstruse Washington politicking. Which may be a good thing. . .local involvement is valuable.

But local and national politicians still need proxy interest groups to create visible demand for their decisions and actions, to provide them with political cover. In the past, this "service" was provided by interest groups and other organizations that represent large groups of voters. But now Web-based applications such as Web Lab allow more ad-hoc groups focusing on a specific decision to serve the same purpose.

"In the typical bulletin board system [BBS] environment, the bad drives out the good [as Garrett Gruener discovered; see box page 31]. In a small group dialogue, most of the time the good drives out the bad," says Marc Weiss, founder and executive producer of Web Lab, which hosts and runs small group online dialogue sessions.

Before founding Web Lab, Weiss had spent many years in the independent film world, eventually producing a successful public TV documentary series called P.O.V. Though the series was successful, he says, "Many documentaries were made to be seen by a live audience, with a discussion after. So while P.O.V. reached several million people a week, we lost the ability to have the follow-up discussion." In 1994 he started experimenting with hosting chats on AOL following his shows, eventually migrating to asynchronous BBS discussions. In 1996, P.O.V. aired a documentary about Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Viewers were invited to a website to submit stories about how the war had affected their lives and to discuss the unresolved issues around it. "The hope was to use the advantage of the passage of time and the anonymity of the Web to encourage people to talk in a new way," recalls Weiss. "The stories people submitted were wonderful, but [the reaction to and participation in] the dialogue was spectacular. It went on for more than a year, with fresh people, including veterans and former anti-war activists, coming in all the time. Some vets said they learned more about themselves in these discussions than they did in the previous 20 years. It was pretty inspiring."

He left P.O.V. in 1997 to found nonprofit Web Lab, with $175,000 from The MacArthur Foundation, as a center of experimentation with public-interest projects on the Web. Web Lab continued working with the P.O.V. series to produce websites and dialogues. Some elicited little response, but "others, on hot-button issues, became flame wars," Weiss recalls, echoing Gruener. So the organization decided to rethink online discussions in a way that introduced accountability but maintained the openness of anonymity. It partnered with media-production firm GMD Studios to design software to run limited-term, asynchronous, lightly moderated small-group

discussions. The Small Group Dialogue software, now built on top of a collaboration server from San Francisco-based Web Crossing, allows anyone to take part, but in a very structured way.

Before the discussion begins, participants register and create a profile, choosing a pseudonym, providing a short bio, and giving details such as gender, age, ethnicity, locale, and any other demographic data relevant to the particular discussion. For some discussions, participants also agree to basic standards of conduct. . .or are asked to suggest ground rules. The profile lasts only as long as that particular discussion – if the person participates again for a different topic, he is asked for a new profile. Each registrant is assigned to a group of up to 15 people that reflects the diversity of the group as a whole. Although anyone can read anyone's profile and messages posted to any group, participants can post messages or create new topics only in the group to which they were assigned.

Just before the discussion begins, the participants receive two e-mails: one letting them know which group they are in and another with a digest of bios of the others in their group. "They see at a glance how diverse their group is and that it's going to be an interesting group to take part in," says Weiss. It also serves to give the group an immediate sense of community – and the buy-in to feel accountable to each other and to the group as a whole. This self-regulation does work: In the fall of 1998, a discussion about the politics around the Clinton impeachment hearings went on for four months in 15 groups and saw 13,000 messages posted. None of the messages had to be deleted, and not one participant was ejected.

In fact, Web Lab has what Weiss calls "almost a religious precept" against intervening. When Web Lab moderators intervened in a few early discussions, says Weiss, "The dynamic changed. People would write to us and say, 'Can't you intervene?' So we decided to hold back next time. And someone from [inside] the group would always come in and mediate," instead of asking for outside help.

"After seven years doing this," says Weiss, "it still amazes me how quickly people become so intimate with each other." He ascribes this openness to the pseudonymity as well as to the fact that people feel freer to be more candid online. "There's also a group psychology," he continues. "The adventurous souls will break the barriers, and others will follow and find it exhilarating."

WEB LAB INFO

Headquarters: New York, NY

Founded: April 1997

Employees: 2

Funding (for the Small Group Dialogue project): $175,000 from The MacArthur Foundation

Key metric: Clinton impeachment discussion elicited 13,000 posts from 750 participants in 15 groups. . .and zero participants kicked out or asked to leave

URL: www.weblab.org/sgd

Just before the discussion is scheduled to end, members can vote on whether to keep the group and the conversation going. In one recent case, all 18 groups participating in a discussion among women with breast cancer voted to keep going. "That's atypical," admits Weiss, "but there is a tremendous sense of connection among group members." Sometimes so much trust develops among group members that they start posting with their real names and e-mail addresses. When Web Lab noticed that starting to happen, it built a private e-mail tool for members to use instead.

Other discussions that it has run include "Listening to the City," in partnership with America*Speaks*, to talk about what to do with the World Trade Center site. Because the object of that discussion was to make policy recommendations, Web Lab added a polling module to "take the temperature of the audience."

America*Speaks* was founded by Carol Lukensmeyer to bring about inclusive, practical, results-oriented interaction between public officials and citizens. Its gatherings are akin to town meetings, where discussions between officials and their constituents are face-to-face and the goal is to achieve a specific decision on an issue. The meetings are facilitated by technology it licenses from Web Lab and Covision. But Lukensmeyer makes it clear that technology is just a tool; the secret to creating a successful event is careful, thoughtful planning that leverages her years of experience and intimate knowledge of the workings of government, she says.

The main challenge is to ensure that the citizens involved represent the true affected population, not just the usual suspects or narrow interest groups. AS uses a matrix of age, gender, race, income and geography to accept or "wait list" people who offer to participate. America*Speaks* also makes sure that the political decision-makers are involved and have bought in to the process. Why would they defer their decision-making to citizens? "It's a paradox," she answers. "Politicians can't get what they want to get done, because they don't have a constituency to support them. So yes, they know they're giving up some power, but if it works, they are left with a knowledgeable, committed constituency to support them for what they want to do." In essence, a politician gives up some decision-making power in the short term in order to build a loyal, engaged, and empowered group that will support her on other projects. . .or in other elections. And in her experience, "People will make compromises if they are involved. People want to take responsibility for their community."

With the right structure, says Lukensmeyer, Web "technology can develop safe public spaces that allow citizens themselves the ability to weave the collective wisdom of the general public, and to give officials the ability to receive it in context." While policy-

GARRETT GRUENER: A (NON-DEAN!) EXPERIMENT IN OPEN ONLINE CAMPAIGNING

Garrett Gruener, venture capitalist and founder of AskJeeves, ran for governor of California during the recall election (but dropped out before the actual voting). No technology newbie, he consciously chose to use the tools of the Web to inform and interact with voters.

The Gruener for Governor website included more real content about the issues – a proposed budget, white papers, and videos of Gruener talking about his stance on various issues – than any other candidate, Gruener says. "The meta-message was first, this wasn't traditional politics, and second, that we had specific ideas and back up" information to explain those ideas. Linked to each key issue was a discussion board, where people contributed their own thoughts. "It was an imperfect mechanism," he says. "But it went to the point that these things are two-way." (Josh Ross, who developed Gruener's website, is now Director of Internet Strategy for the Kerry campaign.)

Eventually, however, Gruener decided to remove the discussion boards, for reasons Usenet fans will recognize: "The problem was that the bad [participants] drive out the good," he says. "The people who want to flame everyone drive out anyone who wants to have a coherent discussion." Perhaps he should have used Web Lab for his discussion area!

The website also included a blog that allowed comments. "The quality there was higher than the discussion boards," says Gruener. (That may be a passing phenomenon; blog spam is now a growing problem.)

Does he have any advice for politicians who want an interactive website? "If I had it to do over, I would have the same features," he insists. "But I would have more mediation, and a password-protected area for people who really did want to participate." Participants – including supporters and detractors – could graduate to the password-protected area by adding value to the campaign in some way, either taking part in intelligent debate or in a less vocal way, by volunteering or fundraising, he suggests. "You don't want to simply grade people's posts and invite them" into the password-protected discussion, he says. "You can use other pathways to find out if people are interested in participating. In open source, the cream rises to the top. In politics, you need recruitment. You go out of your way to bring people in, even if they're not necessarily for you. And if they use [your] bullhorn to say bad things, you need to figure out a way to escort them out."

In the days just before the election, Gruener threw his support behind Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante. Despite the potential headaches from using technology, Gruener believes growth in membership of political parties will be driven by its use. "In real life when you talk to someone, you don't immediately go into broadcast mode. If you're smart, you first find out what that person is interested in. So the right approach [for a candidate] is to turn [the current top-down approach] around. First find out what people are interested in, and then act on that basis."

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makers always want to tap into public opinion, she points out, "almost all of their listening to the public is mediated by others" such as pollsters and media consultants. "Technology can take that away."

As for Web Lab, with its early funding dried up, it now generates revenue by managing dialogues on contract basis – mostly for other nonprofits so far. The breast cancer dialogue, created in partnership with about a dozen prominent breast cancer organizations and called "First Person Plural," may be turned into a book (the proceeds of which would go to fund nonprofits and breast cancer research). And Weiss sees obvious commercial applications for SGD "in education (college or graduate

level, mostly) or for anyone in the communications business, such as the New York Times or a broadcast network or an ad agency, who wants to have discussions online." The organization has also been approached by "one big worldwide technology company that wanted to do discussion between the company and the public about environmental issues," he says.

While Web Lab and Web Crossing share rights to use or license the software, Web Lab has filed a for a patent – still pending – on the combination of techniques and elements used to create and guide its small-group online dialogues. But it has no plans to go commercial, says Weiss: "There's no reason for us to become a dot-com. We would lose all our tax advantages." ■ **R 1.0**