

THE AGE OF ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

Category: Hub Articles

Published: Saturday, 28 May 2016 09:53

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Hits: 1504

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THE GAZETTE

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THURSDAY, September 8, 2008

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Real Debate is Possible We're Not Seeing It Yet

BY DAVE HUGHES

YOUR HUB CONTRIBUTOR

One thing which has exploded during this Presidential Campaign is Online Politiking. Many more millions of Americans have seized their personal computers and gone online than those who used to write letters to their local newspapers or called into talk radio. Ev- erybody is Blogging Politics

Is this Progress? The jury is still out. I have long had a great interest in the potential of something I named long ago (1980) called "Electronic Democracy," whose bene?ts might emerge from personal computers and affordable connectivity. However, this was also supposed to raise the quality of political discourse. All American voters would be able to exchange their

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opinions "direct and unfiltered" online with each other as well as with officials on issues.

The days of Randolph Hurst and yellow journalism were supposed to be over. For a brief moment, it was. In the infancy of pre Internet networks, a few promising things happened. I was able to set up the "Rogers Bar" BBS in 1980: a Radio Shack computer bulletin board with dial-in modem, where anyone with a computer, dial-out modem, and telephone could dial into the BBS, and exchange their opinions with each other on political issues. Many did.

Because their call went over local exchange telephone lines, local Colorado Springs residents dialed in because there was no long distance or computer access cost. They debated primarily about local issues and local candidates for elections I named it "Rogers Bar," because the real Rogers Bar in Old Colorado City was where local political issues had been discussed, face-to-face, for years by west-siders over a beer or coffee. They could now glance at the paper or follow television or radio announcements, then discuss and debate the issues online with hundreds of others not just with their family and a few co-workers.

And they didn't have to let editors or news anchors do the thinking for them. This was similar to the days of the New England Town Hall, when locals could walk a short distance to where someone wielded the gavel to keep order and keep the discussion moving. People debated and expressed their political opinions directly with others. The local news- paper owner stood by on the sidelines. As always, most just listened to both sides debate, argue, agree, or come to a consensus, and then the "silent majority" made up their individual minds before going to the polls to cast their own secret ballots.

Pure democratic process: Be informed, debate, listen, decide; then vote. I saw that it might be possible that pure examples of democratic process could be tried on as "Electronic Democracy" When people live too many miles from each other, cannot make meetings on every issue, the issues are many and more complex, and people don't have that much time for politics.

Well, my BBS was responsible in the 1980s for halting political insider computer purchasing and contracting in the one-party County government, and for electing an unknown to city council, over a much better "publicly" known candidate.

This was to the dismay of both the Re- publican Power Brokers of Colorado Springs, AND the newspapers and television stations who thought they had a lock on all local political debate,

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while the "silent majority" had no voice.

One such case came when the political choice was that the Rogers Bar BBS worked. Whether to vote for Professor Bob Loevy as City Councilman — known to many because of Media going to 'him repeatedly as a college expert on local politics — or unknown Wayne Fisher, who ONLY became well known to me from the online discussions. Fisher put his campaign on my Rogers Bar BBS. Bob Loevy did not. All I did was act as the "Electronic Bartender" in that online "Bar," keeping order, and keeping the discussion moving. When the votes were counted, Fisher beat Loevy by 180 votes out of 22,000 cast.

A total upset. The Gazette called me the next morning. "Did your BBS win the election for Fisher?" I said yes, it sure helped. Votes by those on the BBS who got to know Fisher beyond what little the newspaper and television said about him made the razor thin edge difference. The Council tilted 5 to 4 against the old time, face-to-face mayor, who was ticked off. Councilmen all wanted a computer and access to a city owned BBS. They got it, at taxpayer expense.

Suddenly, Colorado, Springs awakened to the potential of the Personal Communications in City of Colorado Springs. They created the Telecommunications Policy Advisory Committee. And they put me on it. The rest is history. Colorado Springs took its first baby steps into online politics and public administration. That very early example of electronic democracy was lionized across the country. Reporters from the Wall Street Journal, Time, NOVA, Wired Magazine, National Geographic, Rocky Mountain News, German Stern Magazine, and Japanese Yumura Shimbun all visited the REAL Rogers Bar, to meet me and report on the political "BBS."

Personal Computer Electronic Democracy as an idea was born. Ah, but those promising days have now been eclipsed by telecom giants like Verizon, Comcast, Microsoft, AOL, and Google video, Real Audio and YouTube who have pulled the Internet and ' politics back into super-cial, top-down, mass ENTERTAINMENT. . '

Sure, entertainment has always been part of American politics, while serious debate often was secondary. But - as the two national conventions were being watched by over 30 million viewers each, there was still an overwhelming amount of entertainment and sound bite politics — from the scripted cracks by Sarah, repeated slips of the tongue by candidates OR the intentional, twisting of terms into quip slogans by campaign managers and biased reporters. But serious debate of issues online? Who is kidding whom?

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It has become, for millions, all about whether Obama's use of the term "lip- stick on a pig, is still a pig" was a crack at Sarah Palin or not. . This election may be de- cided 90% by entertainment and slogans, via paid ad- vertising. Mass media and snapshot politics still rule. But perhaps the scene will change as more people go , online to small quality blog sites owned by individuals ' _ few effective online moderators like the New England Town Hall man with the gavel or like me acting as the Electronic Bartender; much is just babble. So most blogs operate as a mob-ocracy, rather than de-mocracy. The potential is there, but rarely achieved. Maybe someday genuine electronic democracy will emerge.

I hope I live that long.