

**Citizens' Search of the World Wide Web during Elections:  
Rhetoric and Dialogism in Electoral Politics**

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It is a pleasure to be invited back to this conference, especially as a keynoter. Kurt and Marty must have considerable tolerance for the ambiguities in my thinking about the culture of technology, for this is the second time I've been asked to keynote a conference here dedicated to that subject. Fourteen years ago I first ventured into the surreal community of College Station, arriving on a plane where I was one of only two people not in uniform. I came to talk about communication technology, consciousness, and culture—a trio of concepts that has dominated my scholarly work since that first effort to think coherently about them (Gronbeck, 1990). An interesting part of that 1989 visit was a presentation by an archivist very excited after the election of 1988 about developing plans for an upcoming presidential library, which, he assured us, would include programs for scholars working on American politics. Sure enough, my next time to College Station came six years later, at the first Presidential Rhetoric Conference, where I tried to talk theoretically about technology and the presidency—specifically, the presidency in the televisual age (Gronbeck, 1996).

So, Texas A&M and its commitments to intellectual work, especially on presidents, have been very good to and for me, and for those experiences I thank Professors Medhurst and Ritter. Now, in 2003, I'm given still another opportunity to see if I can talk sensibly as a rhetorician about communication technologies and American politics.

Whenever I think of the state of American political rhetoric, and in a more elevated way about American political culture, I inevitably fall back on an admittedly romantic but I think useful view of politics in the late fifth and early fourth century BCE Athens, to my understanding of the citizen-based polis. By the time of the rule of Pericles (495-429 BCE), the public forums were in place. Legislatively, the Assembly met in the Areopagus about thirty-five times a year. The dikasteria, the large popular juries of 201 to 1,001 people each, were drawn from a pool of 6,000 citizens to make the legal system run. Administratively, the Council of 500 was comprised of fifty citizens drawn from each of ten localist blocks called demes, the root of the English word “democracy.” And even the Board of Ten Generals, the stratego, which was a military and civic-ceremonial unit, was elected by the citizen’s Assembly (Polis, 2002; Swartz, 1998; Smith, 1998).

In this vision of the Athenian polis, we see government run by active citizens—okay, only male citizens—but nonetheless, by citizens who lived out a life of participatory politics. There certainly were administrative posts, but decision making in all spheres of governance came back to the people. To be sure, such an ideal, what I’ll consider a normative model of politics and governance, is incapable of being replicated in a country of soon-300 million souls. But yet, I am convinced, its underlying assumptions can be used to assess the strengths of any given democratic government, for the world of the polis, idealized or not, was based on civic-moral principles that are still useful for purposes of evaluation:

1. The principle of civic service. The first principle is, simply, that participatory democracy is not possible without a citizenry willing to contribute in significant ways to the maintenance of the governmental system.
2. The principle of popular judgment. That service must include a willingness to actively assess the performance of governmental employees in situations where the citizens' voices, rather than those of special-interest or political groups, carry the most weight.
3. The principle of collectivization. In what must have been a tribal tradition, citizens, as did the subjects of old, should gather collectively in preparation to fulfil their civic obligations in executive, legislative, and judicial governance.
4. The principle of access. In the polis, the gap between the governors and the governed was comparatively small, making interaction between decision makers and those affected by them not only possible but even efficacious. Access to political actors allows citizen participation not only in elections but also in governance.
5. The principle of political accountability. In turn, those in positions of power must be willing to take popular judgment seriously. So, while Demosthenes survived Aeschines' challenge to his receiving a crown for public service, he was later in life forced into exile for taking money from one of Philip of Macedon's lieutenants. Hero or not, he had to pay for his political faults.

In these five principles, two guiding the conduct of governors, and three, the governed, we find the beginning of a civic ethic. It certainly is not complete, but service, judgment, collectivization, access, and accountability are ideals that, I hope, by the end of

this presentation can provide a Hubble-sized lens through which to examine politics at the dawn of the analog age.

Tonight I'll work through five topics in greater and lesser degrees. First, I'll say a few words about the American model of political--especially presidential--campaigning as it developed through the last decades of the twentieth century, preparatory to a second topic: the Internet's penetration into electoral politics, especially in the 2000 and 2002 elections. That will set up a third section, the central factual base of this address, citizens' search of the World Wide Web during elections, by reviewing parts of my own and one of Pew Charitable Trust's 2002 studies of the electorate's use of the Internet. Those data, to me, suggest movements toward a dialogic communication model important to American political culture, which becomes the fourth topic, and which prepares me for the fifth--the Athens-inspired Golden Age model of citizen participation, to help us, finally, assess the communication revolution prophesied by futurists and political rhetoricians alike.

### The American Way of Political Campaigning

To highlight briefly what I identify as salient characteristics of American political campaigning, I first must comment even more briefly on American political culture generally. I think that we have evolved our political system in the electronic age to the point that it runs on five defining axioms:

1. The American political system is strongly promotional, built around an advertising model that is employed by both governmental representatives and

the constituents in their turn who wish to influence them. We live in an era devoted less to political deliberation than to political sales.

2. U.S. politics has been accelerated and condensed, leaving little room for reflection. Problems move on and off the public screen quickly, and short messages have become the essence of political communication.
3. American politics depends upon dramatic forms. Analyses of problems and their solutions are cast in dramas, and theatrical story-telling--often, performed narratives--dominate public political messages from campaign ads to presidential speeches.
4. The most common bases for today's political judgments are sentiments and caring characters. Sentimental appeals to love, pity, anger, and righteousness form the core of political communicative relationships, and political character seems based less on appeals to public morality than invocations of public caring.
5. The visualization of politics positions citizens largely in the chairs of witnesses or spectators. Even since Murray Edelman wrote his first book Politics as Symbolic Action (1962) some forty years ago, we have understood that politicians' performances ask us, yes, to judge, to endorse, to see, to approve via the vote, but seldom require that we otherwise act in a political manner. Overall, as Edelman argued, we are asked primarily to acquiesce to what is being done to and for us by the professionals. Our essential relationship to governance today is that of the spectator to the actor.

Political promotionalism, acceleration and condensation, drama, sentimentality, and spectatorship are most clearly visible during what Ed Black (1973) called, so simply, "electing time." Political advertising, theatrical political events such as the GOP's infamous straw poll debacle at the Iowa State Fair, push-poll telemarketing, the parades of the wounded and the needy at both parties' national conventions, the delivery of five-to-eight speeches on five-to-eight campaign stops a day, biographical and résumé campaign films telling stories of political love and caring--these are but the most obvious of the campaign activities that illustrate the axioms I recited (Gronbeck, 2002).

Such a political culture, of course, creates exciting opportunities for newly minted political theories and clever, even raucous, critiques by scholars such as those sitting in this room. But it also has produced a disengaged citizenry that feels alienated and powerless in the face of the enormous complexities of policy making in a global environment, of the big money from big business and big lobbies that appears to drive policy making, and of the odd sense of separation from political actors that they feel even in the era when those actors come into their living rooms, up-close-and-personal, via the broadcast media on the evening news, and fictively, during primetime airing of the West Wing and Mister Sterling. I will return to this understanding of the American system of campaigning—and governance—as promotional near the end of this talk.

### The Information Highway and the Beltway

In the calculations of Christopher Arterton (Anderson & Cornfield, 2003), it took newspapers over a hundred years from their infancy to reach fifty percent of the American population. The telephone did it in seventy years; the phonograph, in fifty-

five; and cable television, in thirty-nine. The personal computer was into the homes of over half the American population in sixteen years--moving about as fast as color TV (fifteen years). And, of course, the growth of PC use has been paralleled over the last decade by increased personal use of the Internet.

Consider that at the dawn of the twenty-first century, 143 million Americans--about 54 percent of the population--were using the Internet, with new users being added at a rate of more than two million per month (US DOC, 2001). More intriguingly, about three-quarters of the population went online sometime in 2001, averaging almost ten hours per week online, and with almost half of those not then online expecting to be so by the end of 2002 (Cole, 2001). In the face of such a surge of Web use, for the first time in the medium's history, television viewing in this country actually fell. And, so far as politics is concerned:

- Almost half (45.1%) of the American using the Internet agreed that “by using the Internet people like you can better understand politics” (Cole, 2001, p. 82).
- A quarter (25.6%) believed that “by using the Internet people like you can have more political power,” while a fifth (20.9%) assumed that “by using the Internet people like you will have more say about what the government does” (ibid.).
- In late 2000, after the Florida voting irregularities threw the presidential contest into court, seventeen percent of Internet users got political news online, about doubling the usual percentage looking for political news in a digital medium, supporting the conclusion that heightened political interest can drive citizens to use their computers for political information-gathering (More online, 2001).

- Yet, from focus group research descriptions, there is apparently a significant gap between the information that Web citizens want and that which is being supplied by congressional office, committee, and leadership sites (Congress online, 2002), which suggests that citizens are driven outside of officially constituted political units for political information. The Web, therefore, seems to be developing into a twenty-first century version of Habermas's (1989) vision of the eighteenth-century public sphere.

That last point provides an important clue to the Internet's place in the panoply of American political media. While the other statistics suggest that a plugged-in citizenry is growing, the last point signals a possible political revolution in the making. Of course it is too early to predict it, because the number of political Web users still is comparatively small and because, as yet, we do not know much about where they go: just electronic newspapers? maybe a political party? or even [www.sierraclub.com](http://www.sierraclub.com) or how about [www.klukluxklan.org](http://www.klukluxklan.org)? The Internet's role in generating political information, opinion, and advice simply must be documented and assessed if in fact it is becoming large enough to actually affect electoral outcomes—and I am convinced that it is.

#### Two Studies of Political Uses of the Internet During Campaign 2002

The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press combined with the Pew Internet and American Life Project under their respective directors, Andrew Kohut and Lee Rainie (2003), in a nationwide telephone survey of 2,745 adults between October 30 and November 24, 2002, exploring citizen uses of the Internet as a source of campaign news. And, a related telephone survey of 1,355 adults in four Midwestern states--swing

states Iowa and Minnesota, GOP-dominated Nebraska, and Democratic Party-dominated Illinois--was conducted by the University of Iowa Center for Media Studies and Political Culture, which I direct. I worked with the former director of the Iowa Social Science Institute, Arthur H. Miller, on Midwestern citizens' political uses of the Internet; ISSI actually conducted the survey, with phoning running from September 23 until election eve, November 3. A second sample of adults who also were Internet users was contacted the three weeks following the election to more fully explore the actual sites that were visited by plugged-in voters (Gronbeck & Miller, 2003). We weighted respondents from the different states by the size of the states' populations.<sup>1</sup>

Kohut and Rainie's Pew study and ours came up with somewhat different-but-compatible results. About one in six voters (15.8%) we contacted said that they used the Internet to get political information, opinion, and advice, while the Pew study found that two in nine (22%) used the Internet to get election news. The difference in our results is attributable, I believe, to the way the question was asked. Pew was focused on political news, so it is little wonder that almost two-thirds of their respondents (64%) most often went to national and local news organizations' websites for information. I suspect that because we asked questions not about news but about political information, opinion, and advice, only a third of our respondents reported going to news organizations sites over the last month. More intriguingly, about 30% of them reported going to religious or secular political action, issue information, e-democracy, and political party or candidate sites--a sign, we believe, of explicit, politically directed behavior. This is within two percent of the number of respondents in the Pew study who said they go to politically oriented sites. Still more intriguingly, 36% reported going to humor and entertainment or

celebrity sites, though the degree to which those were useful politically cannot be ascertained. I will return to the question of humor sites shortly.

The most significant aspect of these results is the fact that about 30% of our and Pew's respondents went to politically interested sites: those run by political institutions and candidates, e-democracy groups, and religious as well as secular organizations with political positions. Still more significant data, for me, came from our cross tabulations--descriptions of the degree to which groups of respondents went to different sites. For example, as one might expect, two-thirds (67.1%) of the people reporting that they visited political party sites also said that they visited political candidate sites. But, only about 30% of the people who went to political party sites also went to e-democracy sites (30.9%) or sites run by politically interested organizations (28.4%). And, less than one in five (18.7%) of the people who went to political party sites also went to religiously oriented web sites, and, from the other viewpoint, only one in eight (12.5%) of the people who went to religious sites also went to political party sites. If we in fact have tapped into political information-seeking behavior in this study, then we are seeing the development of a cadre of discriminating voters who have a sense of where to find what they want from differentiated sources of political information, opinion, and advice.

Some additional opinions offered by information-seeking, computing-using voters are worth commenting upon. Those using the Internet to search for political materials were half again more likely to be "very much interested" in the 2002 campaign as those who didn't use a computer at all, and twice as likely to be "very much interested" in the election as those who went online but without looking for political material. That is, our study seems to suggest that a significant interest in elections drives enabled web

users to political sites, or vice versa--that significant interest in political sites generates more voter interest in elections. Either way, participatory democracy profits. And, to add one more nail to this argument: over two-thirds (70.7%) of plugged-in citizens who report seeking political information online trust that information somewhat or a great deal, while only a third (36.6%) of web users who don't seek political information do. Thus, with exposure to the variety of political information sources online comes trust in the Internet itself.

If we examine trust in media for political information, opinion, and advice across respondents with varying relationships to computers and the Internet, we gain even more useful data. We divided our respondents into four groups: those who do not use a computer, those who do but don't go on the Internet, those who go on the Internet but not for political purposes, and those who go out looking for political information, opinion, and advice. Almost half of the computer users (48.8%) who do not go out on the 'Net place their greatest trust in national and local television for political news, while less than a quarter (23.2%) of our web-crawling respondents do. As a matter of fact, almost one in five (18.7%) of them put their greatest trust in the Internet as the favored source of political materials during election time.

We suspect that questions about trust in the Internet have to do with the sense of political empowerment or self-control. One sign of this conclusion can be found in Michael Cornfield's analysis (2003) of Campaign 2002 Internet use. In one of the studies he drew from, 56 percent of respondents going on the World Wide Web for political information said that they were "going to search for information without a specific site in mind"; here, then, over half of the web users had the independence to rely on search

engines rather than particular sites for their needs.<sup>2</sup> Such people certainly appear to be netizens in the senses that that word gets bandied about: people participating digitally in political processes.

Next, let me take up an absolutely neglected topic: humor and entertainment. You will recall that more than a third--36.0%--of our web-using respondents said that they regularly visit humor and entertainment sites. One might be tempted to think about such folks as escapist-avoiders: they want a good laugh, not serious politics. But let us suppose for a moment that a goodly portion of these people are actually going to sites with political humor--and Art Miller and I know from our survey that at least some are, because they mentioned such sites as michaelmoore.com and buzzflash.com in open-ended questions about where they went online during the campaign. Why go there? Entertainment? Perhaps. A sense of political cynicism and alienation so strong that only ridicule of politics and politicians will do? Certainly. Cynicism and alienation have marked American politics clearly at least since the 1988 Harwood Group study of political attitudes on Main Street (Harwood, 1991 cf. Hunter & Bowman, 1996).

But for a moment, consider another possibility: that the web-based humor, cartoons, morphed pictures of politicians in compromising positions, flash movies, bad jokes, and urban-myth type quotations are part of what Kenneth Burke (1937/1984) called the comic frame or comic critique: the discourses of social-political correction. Particularly in Attitudes Toward History, Burke discusses comic critique as a method for offering social-political attacks in the name of reform, not revolution. As Robert Wess 1996, p. 85) says in his book about Burke, "Comedy's smile demystifies without the corrosive effects of demystification that is socially disintegrative."<sup>3</sup>

Think of all of the funny, sarcastic, cynical, bitter, and baldly assaultive political humor that floats around the web. Electing time brought an especially dense barrage of such material, particularly in pictorial and cartoon forms. On the website for Iowa's Center for Media Studies and Political Culture, I have collected a sample of such work focused on President Bush and his administration.<sup>4</sup> Among the samples are tasteless, scurrilous, even slandering portrayals of the President and some of his chief administrative officers. Yet, what is more interesting for our purposes, the cartooned, photographic, and morphed representations follow clear, politically relevant, themes: the connection between the petroleum industry and government policy; a son taking up his father's battle with Saddam Hussein; the President's unwillingness to see North Korea as a greater threat than any group in the Middle East; a false patriotism substituting for positive social and economic policies; the illiterateness of a leader who says he is trying to educate the country's children. And the beat goes on: cartoons, satire, photos, and electronically doctored photos flow through the ether, become collected at originary and derivative websites such as mine, and are easily accessed by anyone who knows that Google has a special compartment in its search engine for images.

And let me add one more extension to this matter: I do not have to go searching for humorous and assaultive political images. They come right into my computer thanks to e-mail. I am sent almost 100% of the political humor images and sites I come in contact with. Almost ninety percent (87.8%) of our respondents who went online said they used e-mail. So, if you're willing to hook yourself up to a few listservs and if you have friends who know that you are politically interested, the products of humor and entertainments sites with political force come tumbling into your inbox. I do not have to

use Google or Yahoo or any of the other mega-webcrawlers to acquire images of the President or the situation in Iraq. Such materials are dumped on me literally every day.

The general point I want to drive home is this: The Internet, more than even television and radio, possibly even more than newspapers and magazines, is the single most potent—I should say, potentially potent—communication medium in politics. A third of our netizens got news and information from the digital backdoors of television and newspaper operations; a third of them got politically relevant information, opinion, and advice from a variety of virtual political institutions and both religious and secular opinion and action groups; and about a third of them went online to humor and entertainment sites that have the potential, at least, to use the comic frame as a means of urging political critique and even reform. And all of them undoubtedly got a sense of self-identity, as people who were taking practical actions to prepare themselves for electoral activity, and maybe more than that--a generally active life as a citizen in a polis with electronic connections between the governors and the governed.<sup>5</sup>

### Dialogue in the Polis

Now then, we are left to ponder what the survey results might portend for the future of electoral politics, always mindful of Craig Varoga's (2003) as well as Tuckel and O'Neill's (2002) warnings about relying on survey data in a time when response rates to phone surveys have dropped significantly.<sup>6</sup> Given that the speculations I want to offer are just that, a kind of future-casting for political culture, I do not worry much about technical-methodological problems with the data base.

My central interest, as I hope I suggested in the beginning, is with participatory democracy, more specifically, with the ways in which some of the principles of participatory democracy can be operationalized in a large, complex country, and, more specifically still, with the signs that the Internet can play significant roles in making large-scale participatory democracy work. In drawing from the romantic vision of the polis five civic-moral principles--service, judgment, collectivization, access, and accountability--I begin to envision a dialogic model of democratic government.

By "dialogic" I mean three different things: (1) Most obviously, perhaps, I think of relationships between politician-governors and their constituents as dialogic, where political philosophies, policy proposals, arguments for and against those proposals, and electioneering inquiries are articulated with mutual regard for the other. Political governors must take citizens seriously, and, equally important, citizens must work to understand the ideas and actions of their politicians. As the man who set up this country's first state-based, election-oriented web site, Steven Clift (2003, pp. 163-164), has said, "When the 1994 election was over, the online public commons of Minnesota E-Democracy . . . continued to hum with citizen dialogue about the issues that mattered to them. . . . The lesson our organization learned: Use elections to draw more people into sustained use of the Internet in democracy. . . . Another lesson: good discussions foster exchanges between those who do politics and those who talk politics." Once dialogic relationships between governors and the governed are established during electing time, they must be nourished and made use of during governing time.

(2) A second conception of dialogic draws from Bahktin's understanding of the polyphonic or the heteroglossic in human communication (Bahktin, 1981), that is, from

understanding that an individual's speech draws from the language-use of many others and that the presence of many voices in the collectivity entails the presence of many viewpoints. The encounters between voices and between viewpoints are dialogic, instantiating the engagement with each other of contraposed logoi or ideas. There is no single voice or viewpoint even in the politics of dominant individuals within political institutions. The operations of the President's cabinet, the legislative committees and floors, and the chamber of the courts must always be understood as dialogic, as multivocal, with voices never reducible to a single register or key.

(3) And finally, the same is true outside political institutions--in the gatherings of what Habermas (1989) termed the public sphere. Berman and Mulligan (2003, pp. 83-84) have noted that the Internet "bridges political distances, allowing individuals from across traditional ideologies and from many different organizations--individuals who normally would have little contact with each other on matters of activism--to contact each other and collaborate on specific issues." So, opposition to the Communications Decency Act of 1996 joined together digitally such diversified opponents as the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Library Association, and both Time-Warner and America Online. Berman and Mulligan also mention the web group MoveOn.org, a grassroots movement organized to oppose a pro-impeachment vote in the proceedings against Clinton, and one that raised so much money online that it could move against pro-impeachment legislators nationwide in Campaign 2000, and of course today is heavily involved in the anti-Iraqi war movement. The local in the public sphere can be stretched around the world by the Internet, bringing McLuhan's global village (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968) into existence.

The dialogic perspective in politics, therefore, can and I think should inform our conception of relationships between leaders and the led, between the diverse voices within government itself, and between gatherings of citizens that form less around ideologies and parties and more around issues made important by life experiences, self-interest, and material circumstances. Now, so far as the Internet is concerned, dialogic relationships between governors and the governed could be maintained by the .gov websites, if governmental agencies ever actually took seriously messages sent to them through that medium. Similarly, governmental processes could be made to work electronically if congressional committees opened testimonial possibilities to electronic audiences-- something Ross Perot seemed to be talking about in 1992 when he proposed electronic town meetings and something approaching digital plebiscites. What Hacker and Todino (1996) called electronic democratization could occur.

A digitally responsive government or a digitally mediated government, running on dialogic principles, however, seems too far-fetched even for a polyanna Iowan like myself. The third dialogic, digital forum, however, is taking shape even today. What Lev Manovich (2001, p. 213) identifies as "the computer culture's key themes-- interactivity, lack of hierarchy, modularity" can make for highly flexible yet enduring organizational characteristics. When I first actually studied political websites up and running during Campaign '96 (Gronbeck, 1997), I suggested that the Internet could be used for three political purposes: information, solidarity, and persuasion. I argued that its most intriguing use was for creating communities, communities with a sense of solidarity that could transcend space, because localist relationships could be created virtually, without actual proximity.

This is the same promise that Gary Selnow (1998, p. 202) saw as the best-case scenario for developing the Internet politically:

[T]he voters will be able to talk among themselves and form a nucleus of opinion that was not possible before. One of the biggest problems voters in this century have faced is the inability to reach a critical mass. Town hall meetings once served the purpose, sometimes union halls did, but not anymore. We have lost the chances to form groups of sufficient size and heft to get Washington to listen, short of million-man marches and the like, which are usually no more than a flash in the pan. Maybe that will be simpler with the Internet. Maybe.

What Charles Ess (1996, p. 210) sees as the ideal speech situation can more easily occur online than face-to-face. Think about the listservs of which you are a member. They usually operate--and ought to operate--on the principles that Ess has articulated: (1) everyone with the competence to speak is allowed to participate in discourse; (2) everyone is allowed to question all assertions as well to introduce his or her own statements; (3) everyone is allowed to express his or her own attitudes, desires, and needs; and (4) no one is prevented by internal or external coercion from exercising these rights. Those principles become politically empowering when exercised by netizens on such e-democracy sites as Minnesota Politics, on the sites formed around resistance to drilling for oil within the Arctic Circle, as happened last year, and on sites such as the now-influential MoveOn.org.<sup>7</sup>

It is not likely that digital political dialogue is any more elevated than such dialogue is in letters-to-the-editor, the monthly meetings of political party central committees, Rush Limbaugh's radio call-in show, or C-SPAN's television call-in show. It

is, rather, the ease with which online chat spaces are accessed, the geographical spread of their memberships, the diversity of their ideological viewpoints, the potential size of their membership base, and, ultimately, the possibility that deliberative chats can be turned into political dialogue of the first sort--that is, with decision makers--that makes digital dialogue so important. It is just such essential localist gatherings around issues of importance that John Dewey, in his 1927 book The Public and Its Problems (1927/1954), believed would revitalize public political activity in the post-World War I era, which he believed saw it eclipsed.

Let me be clear. I agree with Langdon Winner (2003) that claims heralding the arrival of the New World Cyber-Order have been overdrawn. The effort to control people's browsing through systems of portals and of rank-orderings of sites achieved through financial incentives could mean that the economy governs political sites and biases political information in even anti-democratic ways. As well, there is precious little evidence that increasing people's access to political information in the first place, as the Internet seems to do, in any way affects their propensity to vote or engage in other traditional kinds of political activity, though Art Miller and I saw some hints that it could. Langdon Winner (2003, p. 177) concludes after examining studies of the Internet and politics that "Something else must happen within the space of communication if active, deliberative democracy is to come to life."

That something else to Winner (ibid.) is "sustained engagement with others in communities of concern to each individual about issues that affect his or her life." That is, both Winner and I would call for substantial electronic dialogues, built around the models of dialogue available to us from other times and contexts: from our visions of the

Athenian demes and New England town meetings, the varied voices that etched revolutionary and conservative principles in the pamphlet storms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and America, the duelling radio commentators of the 1930s and their call-in counterparts of today, the voices of suffering and discrimination brought to us in the television documentaries and white papers of the 1950s and 1960s, and those labeled "Republican," "Democrat," and "Independent" in C-SPAN's call-in segments. Sustained political interest in and dogged engagement with the issues always have been necessary, from the tribal cultures to the digital cultures, regardless of available media, for participatory democracy to actually produce popularly guided and citizen-sensitive forms of governance. (Cf. the arguments of Rimmerman, 2001.)

#### The Civic-Moral Model of Governance and the Internet

That last statement brings us back to the concerns with which I opened this sermonette: the utility of a normative model of participatory democracy in a society dominated by promotional politics and populated by increasing numbers of citizens reaching out to digital media for political information, opinion, advice, and perhaps even a sense of personal political agency.

Let me say more about promotional politics, about what I earlier talked about as the promotional or advertising model for campaign communication between candidates and voters, condensation and acceleration as characteristic of campaign messaging, storytelling and story-acting as forms of campaign communication, sentimentalization and public caring as bases for relationships between candidates and voters, and citizens as but spectators to all of the promotions that make up what Tom Patterson (2002) in his book

The Vanishing Voter calls "the politics of tedium" that produces "the incredible shrinking electorate."

As well, many commentators have noted that the politics of electioneering turn too easily into the politics of governing. Ever since Sidney Blumenthal (1980) identified the so-called permanent campaign as a mode of thinking that dominates the actions of politicians, others have picked up the cry. So, Gary Woodward (1997), a rhetorician, writes about "a campaigns perspective" as controlling the atmosphere of the White House, while David Paletz (1999, p. 219), a political scientist, opens his textbook chapter on Congress by discussing congressional officeholders' focus on reelection, higher office, favorable images with constituents, and "raising a lot of money for their upcoming campaigning (and to pay off the last one)." Lance Bennett, who works in both a political science and a communication department, argues that the whole political culture runs on money, media, and marketing, and will until serious, citizen-driven reform takes place.<sup>8</sup>

And herein, I would argue, is where a normative, dialogic model of participatory democracy hits the road. Calls for reforming the promotional political culture of the United States are everywhere. Just to note some of the proposals made by scholars I've mentioned: Tom Patterson (2002), among other things, wants to spread out primaries and caucuses so that each state can demand its due, to require the networks to broadcast nine public service Sunday night candidate and interview programs between Labor Day and Election Day, and to make Election Day a holiday. Lance Bennett (1995) wants state-by-state votes tabulated proportionally in place of the winner-take-all philosophy of most states today, continued campaign finance reform, federal regulation of political advertising, a refocusing of the media's coverage of candidates, and more liberal forms of

voter registration. Frances Piven and Richard Cloward (1987/2000) see the only hope for political renewal as coming through from the ground-up, with reform movements and splinter political units or parties that are able to disturb the worn-out, self-satisfied, ossified dialogue of two-party government.

Gary Selnow (1998) spreads the responsibility for reform around, calling upon citizens to use the Internet to move the press into more open coverage and upon politicians to actually lead, to do more than reflect the views of their principal financial and agenda-conscious support groups. Far and away the broadest vision for cultural revolution is Langdon Winner's (2003), when he suggests that the Internet could allow individuals to select their citizenship, whether in their home country or elsewhere, because the confinement of physical spaces is destroyed by the 'Net. If one's citizenship were up for bidding, Winner believes, a mere republican form of government in fact could be replaced by a sprawling, imperial, vital, participatory democracy.

I do not come to you tonight to endorse particular changes in political structures, plans for reform, or ways of underwriting campaigning and governance. I assure you that I could do all of those things, for I happen to think that this country has cobbled together one of the most outlandish political campaign systems ever devised by human beings, that campaign finance reform has not gone nearly far enough, and that one of the curses of commercially based electronic and print journalism is that politics too easily becomes but one more revenue stream for media moguls. But I do not want to talk about any of that.

Rather, I want to return you to Athens. The United States is far too big and complicated to ever function as demes sending their citizens to the District, to state

capitals, to county boards of supervisors, and to city councils to do their executive, legislature, and judicial duties. Now, citizen councils do become attached to government in some arenas, citizens do transport their bodies to court houses when called jury duty, and get-out-the-vote campaigns still can move about half of them to polling booths in the years of presidential elections. Additional forms of citizen physical and financial participation in electioneering, of course, are available. Yet, we cannot reproduce the democracy of the city-state in the republican governmental forms of a territorially and culturally diverse country.

But we can hammer on dialogue as the central communication form of political behavior. To demand of politicians that they act from a mindset of exchange both when addressing their constituencies and their fellow political actors and to convince a citizenry that the only way for it to escape mere spectatorship, to seize significant levers of control in political culture--these acts of political communication require dialogue. I certainly cannot say when and how the institutionalized side of political cultures, the acts of the governors, can and will be shaped in dialogue. But I can say that the growth of citizens' uses of the Internet over the last decade holds promise for creating an Athenian spirit of participation in Americans. A form of digital collectivization has been manifested, access to both the governors and other means of political involvement has been breached, popular judgments fill the websites, the talk shows, and the newspapers, and the cry for political accountability grows louder everyday.

So far as the normative model of participatory democracy is concerned, then, while the principles of civic service--those demanding that citizens participate willingly in the maintenance of the governmental system--are not clearly being observed, we are

living through a time when the four other principles of civic-moral politics are regularly articulated and showing signs of operationalization. Perhaps among all of the other consequences of 9/11 that this country has experienced, a rebirth of patriotism and a strong focus on issues of collective security, individual freedom, economic recovery, and redefinitions of war have awakened sleeping public opinion and motivated its expression.

If so, we can expect to see a sharp upward increase in the curve of citizens' political uses of the World Wide Web, as more and more people use their browsers to pursue political information, opinion, and advice, to engage politically interested assemblages of other citizens, and to sharpen their tools of political critique so as to ultimately reform the whole political culture. That sort of communal response within an evolving political culture could happen, as what Michael Schudson (1998, quoted in Jones, 2001) calls “the monitorial citizen” uses the Internet for political surveillance, stimulation, and action. Participatory democracy could spread even in the United States, thanks to new forms of electrified political rhetoric. Thank you.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>The Pew study was made available as a news release, "Political sites gain, but major news sites still dominant: Modest increase in internet use for campaign 2002," 1/5/03. The Gronbeck & Miller study, "Midwestern citizens' political uses of the internet in campaign 2002," has not yet been released. The Pew study contains questions that have been asked regularly since 1995; its greatest strength is the longitudinal dimension and, in comparison to the Gronbeck & Miller study, the fact that it has been conducted nationwide. The comparative strengths of the Gronbeck & Miller study are its questions about specific sites visited regularly, its comparison of three different kinds of states (swing, conservative, liberal, though these data have not yet been investigated), and its exploration of relationships between trust issues and political information. A third study done by Kathleen Jamieson, "Innovation on the Internet," comparing and contrasting voter-Internet users in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, has not yet released data. And, other studies have been assembled by Cornfield (2003).

The weightings assigned to respondents from the four states we surveyed are based on 2002 mid-summer population estimates offered by the U.S. Census Bureau. With Nebraska, the state with the smallest population, used as a baseline (weighting = 1.00), the respondents from the other three states were weighted as follows: Iowa, 1.706; Minnesota, 2.903; and Illinois, 7.287.

<sup>2</sup> In the Pew study, of those who went online for political news, 64% went to national and local news organizations; 19%, commercial online services (I assume AOL or Yahoo news directories), and 32%, politically oriented sites. Again, that 32% response is within two percent of what Gronbeck & Miller found.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Edwards (2001) on the political potency of cartoons during presidential campaigns.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.uiowa.edu/~policult>.

<sup>5</sup> I would not, actually, push too hard on the activist analysis. As Kohut & Rainie (2003) point out, only 15% of their respondents joined discussion groups or made contributions to political candidates and parties. Thirty-nine percent did take online polls, a kind of speech act but a soft form of participation. Most sought information online--79%, on candidate positions, and 45%, specifically on candidate voting records. The degree to which one sees such actions as "political participation" is a matter of definition.

<sup>6</sup> Varoga (2003) argues that low response rates to telephone surveys re due to cell phones (which cannot be called without permission), caller ID and voicemail technologies, diverse lifestyles that make it hard to catch people, inexperienced pollsters, and the bad science underlying too many of the news organizations polls. Tuckel and O'Neill (2002, 9/1) more systematically studied polling organizations themselves. They found that inaccessibility of respondents was due to dedicated phonelines uses for faxes and online computing, call-screening devices, and a greater willingness for callees to not cooperate largely because of telemarketing experiences. From what they saw in their survey, telephone survey response rates from dropped from an average of about 65% in 1984 to an average of 35% today. While the people working the Gronbeck & Miller fall 2002 survey were unhappy with our response rate, we did better than that average: 45.0% before the election, 43.7% after it. We calculated response rate by dividing the number of completed calls by the number of completed + refusals, maintaining the traditional standard of ten callbacks in pursuit of pickups on all phone numbers generated randomly off Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois area codes. For a phone survey that usually ran in excess of fifteen minutes, our response rates show that we had comparatively well-trained students running the phone bank.

I would that the Pew survey reported in Kohut & Rainie (2003), the reported 33.6% response rate was calculated by multiplying contact, cooperation, and completion rates against each other. Were we to calculate their response rate using the method we did, theirs would be 44.8%.

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<sup>7</sup> Winner (2003) suggests that such dialogue could occur even on a multinational or world level because citizens could be wired in an imperial way to an empire not too far different from the Roman Empire. See below. Cf. Piven and Cloward's (1987/2000) call for bottom-up demands for reform.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett's Center for Communication and Civic Engagement (CCCE) at the University of Washington spawned the [politicalweb.info](http://politicalweb.info), which ran a study of candidate-related websites: sites for 1,035 candidates (Republican, Democratic, other) running in 505 different races. (Sixty-four percent of the 1,631 candidates for those races had websites.) The study documents basic features, online campaign-related links, web-exclusive campaign practices used on some sites, and documentation of issue positions (Foot & Schneider, 2002).