

December 2001

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Recommended Citation

Chen, Hsiang and Chang, Shih-Jye, "The Virtual City of Direct Democracy" (2001). *AMCIS 2001 Proceedings*. 306.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2001/306>

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THE VIRTUAL CITY OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

This paper describes the impetus, system designs, and implementation of direct democracy over the Internet. The Web site, named "The Virtual City of Direct Democracy," allows Internet participants to actively involve themselves in policy-making processes of this virtual city, such as proposing issues, setting agendas, sorting out the priority of issues, debating controversial events, promoting proposals, and participating in voting. Registered citizens of this virtual arena may create political parties to promote their proposals. Data collected from this experimental project can be used to observe in a virtual world the rise and fall of public issues, participants' utilization of direct democracy, social learning processes, and cooperative relationships between policy entrepreneurs and the public in agenda setting.

Internet as a Propeller

During the last century, many different formats within the electronic media have been used to test the possibility of direct democracy in the real world. Telegram, telephone, television, and other similar technologies were employed to construct the utopian dream of direct democracy (Carey 1981). "Electronic democracy," "teledemocracy," "televoting," "electronic town meetings," and "teleconferencing" have been used to represent the technology behind this dream. Though these dreams did not come to full fruition, the technology behind the dream did facilitate solicitation of citizens' opinions and debates, thus improving the public policy-making process (Grosswiler 1998).

The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) during the last ten years has again brought to the desire for building a network of participatory direct democracy. The Internet and related technology have been considered as a new force in transforming contemporary political processes and in promoting communitarian democracy (Abramson, Arterton & Orren, 1988).

Due to their powerful ability in processing and transmitting information, ICTs were expected to allow citizens to acquire policy information with less effort, to participate in public policy-making processes with interactive electronic dialogues, and to debate and compromise with others by suppressing obstacles of time and space. From researchers' views, the rise of the Internet thus may possibly operationalize the utopia dream of participatory direct democracy in the near future.

According to research conducted by Rutgers University in 1998, the Internet potentially enhances the democratic process through its characteristics of interactivity, low cost, speed, and absence of supervision. In addition, the Internet much more effectively facilitates interpersonal communication than other communication media do, such as radio and TV. The Internet is therefore expected to play an important role in issue discussion, communication of opinions, and consensus consolidation. Researchers, such as Strassman (1999) and Westem (1998), believe that the Internet can help solve some dilemmas faced by contemporary political systems of "representative democracy" if applied appropriately.

Citizens vs. Policy Entrepreneurs

Scholars in the fields of political science and public policy point out that in a variety of policy domains, "policy entrepreneurs" clarify policy problems and interpret complicated messages for the public (Kingdon, 1995; Schneider, Teske & Mintrom 1995). Policy entrepreneurs also direct the public's attention toward specific public issues as well as propose solutions. Policy entrepreneurs may be politicians with professional knowledge, executive officials in governments, congressional research

assistants, academics, policy consultants in non-profit organizations, or professional journalists. In other words, these policy elites, not the general public, guide, control, create and shape the problems, policies, and political streams in liberal democracies (Kingdon 1995). The public tend to be treated as passive and ignorant persons, and are excluded from the policy communities composed of those policy elites. Therefore, even citizens with excellent policy solutions may not be able to contribute their ideas to the policy-making process if they do not have access to the policy communities. The power imbalance in the real world of politics thus prevents direct public participation in the policy-making processes of modern democracies.

The question which lies ahead of us today is: "Will a networked direct democracy system facilitate citizen participation and agenda setting?" If all networked participants can express their words with equal opportunity and discuss controversial issues directly with policy entrepreneurs, can we expect a significant change in the current policy subsystem (i.e., policy communities) in which policy entrepreneurs control, guide, and shape the policy-making process?

Virtual City of Direct-Democracy

Our research project attempts to answer the above questions. By introducing citizens' contributions to the policy subsystem which is traditionally occupied by policy elites or dominated by policy entrepreneurs we want to see whether networked direct democracy can improve the process of problem-construction, agenda-setting, and alternative-formulation. Our research incorporates an experimental Web site, named "the Virtual City of Direct Democracy," built by authors. Internet participants, after registration, become citizens of this virtual city. A citizen may submit a variety of issues for discussion in the virtual city hall, debate with other citizens, actively discuss controversial ideas, rank issues and agendas by importance, and vote on proposals and issues.

In this virtual city, a citizen who supports an issue may initiate or participate in a virtual political party. A virtual political party may recruit party members from registered citizens, promote proposals and issues with party strength, ask contributions from citizens, and advertise on the city hall billboard for proposed issues and favored alternatives. Additionally, an electronic newspaper published by the Virtual City of Direct Democracy will be sent to subscribers. This newspaper covers all political activities around the city, especially events in the virtual city hall. A press center will provide detailed reports, both in the virtual and real worlds, as information sources for all participating citizens.

After the structure is completed, the virtual city of direct democracy will operate automatically, with minimal involvement of researchers. Researchers only need to maintain the server, record data, and observe the activities inside the city; they need not actually participate. It is expected that new issues will continually be generated if enough people participate. If new issues arise, new debates and discussions will emerge. If debates are intense enough, political activities in the virtual world should attract enough Internet users willing to revisit the site and to maintain operations of this virtual city. Clearly, the number of participants determines the success of this experimental project.

According to our plan, diverse sets of data will be available once the system is available for Internet users. It is expected that a huge database will be automatically constructed and will allow scholarly analysis. From the recorded dataset, the following dimensions will be analyzed: 1) problem construction, agenda setting, policy alternative formulation, and agenda transformation; 2) construction of debates; 3) rise and fall of virtual political parties; 4) voting behavior; 5) citizens' diverse participation behavior; 6) social learning processes; 7) relationships between policy experts and the public in constructing policy issues.

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