

Democracy, eLiteracy and the internet

<i>Purpose of this paper</i>	Argues that the internet has an important contribution to make to the improvement of the democratic process, but that this contribution can only be effective with advocacy and support from information professionals and educators; the cultivation of eLiteracy by such information professionals and educators is vital in delivering the democratic potential of the internet.
<i>Design/methodology/approach</i>	An opinion piece based on current and recent trends in thinking about digital citizenship, the internet and democracy.
<i>Findings</i>	Hopeful initial visions of the impact of internet technologies on democracy have been shown to be in some ways too optimistic. Many of the most notable social impacts of the internet on our collective well-being have been harmful. The cultivation of eLiteracy as a democratic attribute of citizenship should enable us to make the most of the social beneficent potential of the networks.
<i>Research limitations/implications</i>	Purely an expression of belief about what may prove to be the likely social and political benefits of promoting eLiteracy as an aspect of enhanced citizenship. Offers potential for exploration via more in depth research.
<i>Practical implications</i>	Opens up an optimistic social and political purpose to the cultivation of eLiteracy in a broad mass of citizens.
<i>What is original/value of the paper?</i>	Affirms an optimistic view of the democratic potential of the internet, but makes it clear that this potential will not emerge of its own accord. Citizens must engage intelligently with the social and political issues raised by the internet, in particular with the issue of how the new media enable the electorate to conduct dialogue with government. Information professionals have a particular civic duty to be aware of the democratic significance of their promotion of information literacy and, more specifically, of eLiteracy.

Keywords: eLiteracy; democracy; digital citizenship.

Does the internet offer a new, more powerful medium for the promotion of democracy? Does it open up for us all a greater potential for enhanced participative citizenship in a new, digital global political order? Or is cyberspace a neutral, technologically indifferent area in which the voices of political discourse sound no more coherently or eloquently than before? These are large and seemingly unresolvable issues. But the brief history of internet political science to date has at least given us a few perspectives by which we can orientate ourselves and seek answers to these questions.

From the early days of the internet, there have been optimists who have rejoiced in its potential for promoting active citizenship and enhancing democratic activity. Robbie McClintock of Columbia University is one such. His keynote address to the eLit 2004 conference in New York could be

This is a peer-reviewed author accepted manuscript of the following research article: Joint, N. (2005), "Democracy, eLiteracy and the internet", *Library Review*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 80-85. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00242530510583020>

construed as a political optimist's view of the internet < <http://www.studyplace.org/elit2004/> > (and for background on some definitions of eLiteracy that might illuminate his address, see Allan Martin's exploration of these themes¹).

Taking the urban map (something of a growth area on the web in itself), and transforming it into a political metaphor, he argued that the internet now makes it possible for the type of civilised, 'urbane' discourse identified with metropolitan democratic communities to happen anywhere. Given the close identity of the democratic ideal with the Greek 'polis', the idea of the networks as the ultimate facilitation of a world-wide agora is deeply appealing – not least to an academic from the heart of Manhattan, perhaps the ultimate home of sophisticated liberal discourse.

In this vision of the urban internet, achieving eLiteracy means attaining a form of fully developed digital citizenship, one predicated on the possession of an ability to interpret, navigate and shape the landscape of virtual democracy. This political vision of eLiteracy is endlessly inclusive: as the internet becomes more affordable and increasingly pervasive, it offers the hope of empowering voices that have hitherto been excluded from the traditional, physically circumscribed centres of global power and decision-making by adding them into the new discourse of the one virtual city.

This is all very optimistic of course. But we have to acknowledge that much of our experience of the internet society to date gives us reason to cast doubt on this hopeful vision of e-democracy. Why? Because the networks now open up to us all aspects of the city - this includes the chance to create cyber-ghettoes of our very own, areas of urban squalor shaped to our worst purposes in which we meet only those who share our own prejudices and warped outlook. Holocaust denial, kidporn and other forms of anti-social activity have all formed their grim niches on the Net, in websites, discussion lists and the like. As a result a bastardised form of eLiteracy enables the internet thug to search, locate and colonise these spaces, while expertly circumnavigating both technical filters and the moral challenges of better voices sounding out of more enlightened areas. The most appalling instances of this depraved virtuosity now haunt us in the spectre of terrorist slayings, expertly spread across the net in an attempt to amplify the impact of political murder.

Robbie McClintock is not wrong when he talks about the internet as a mapped urban environment – it's just that the city has bad as well as good neighbourhoods. Ironically, well-mapped networks make it easier for the nasty people to find where the other nasties live so they can go hang out there with them. They also expand the map of our neighbourhood to encompass the whole globe, so that the most virulent politics of the world beyond become part of our local topography.

This darker global vision can be pursued further. An even more pessimistic strand of internet politics sees the Net as a disabler of democracy because of its role in spreading supra-national information

capitalism. If the modern nation is the Greek polis writ large and the hitherto irreducible building block of democracy, then the internet's tendency to override national boundaries can be inimical to national democracies. And because there is no such thing as a single unified 'global democracy', to overturn the nation state in favour of a worldwide virtual trading system is to overturn democracy itself. In this sense, the Net does not so much create maps as tear them up, to the detriment of the benign social structures delineated on them - not so much world wide web as world wide wasteland.

All of which is to say one simple thing: internet technologies are just that, technologies. No technology is good or bad, democratic or undemocratic. In terms of its political effect, the internet is simply what we choose to make of it.

In turn, this also means that we have to consider very carefully the political dimensions of eLiteracy. Given that the network has no intrinsic democratic nature or essence, eLiteracy is not simply the mechanical capacity to exploit an inherently empowering online arena of wise discourse and beneficent knowledge. If the network were 'good' of its own nature, then a mechanical, skill-based approach to the conceptualisation and promulgation of eLiteracy would be acceptable: 'There's the network - just learn how to work it.' But eLiteracy does not mean just the reactive ability to use what is 'there' in an e-world which, in terms of values, is essentially void, neutral. It also implies the ability to shape that world - not only mastering it in a passive, mechanistic sense, but knowing how to infuse it with the values that we think it should have.

The good news is, this does not have to be as high-falutin' as I make it sound. At one level, the eLiterate citizen of the digital polis simply needs to have an awareness of how we should understand and promote e-democracy and to ask of government that political debate fully exploits the potential of the new media.

For example, during the 1990s much excitement about the politics of the internet in the UK was generated by New Labour's interest in the US Democrats' vision of revivifying relationships between voter and government by means of the internet. After all, it was Al Gore who coined the term Information Superhighway. And this Superhighway could lead the ordinary voter more directly to Washington. The supposition was that much of this momentum towards e-democracy could spread eastwards towards Old Europe.

At that time in the UK, as now, many of the quaint rituals of our parliamentary democracy seemed to be ways for controlling information flow. A concrete example would be economic decision-making. The UK fiscal programme for the coming year is symbolically announced in a single speech to parliament by the British Finance Minister ('the Chancellor of the Exchequer'). This process has been used by all parties when in government, and it is ostensibly surrounded by all the trappings of respect for democracy - the Chancellor leaves his official residence with

a red wooden box full of government budget papers, he waves his box to the on-looking cameras and then comes to parliament in all humility to present his (it's always been 'his') budget to the House. At the end he begs Parliament to accept his programme for the next year – the implication being that our discerning parliamentarians could give the Chancellor a good kicking if they didn't like what they just heard, and send him back to Number 11 Downing Street to get it right.

The reality of this procedure is of course that its symbolism is suffused with the trappings of the Nineteenth Century and its information technologies – wood and paper in this case. In actual fact, by unveiling the specifics of a year's financial planning in a single swoop, the UK Finance Minister deprives his opponents of any chance to prepare for meaningful parliamentary debate. From the mid 1990's onwards, modern democratic technologies have been available to allow the mysterious contents of the Chancellor's box to be securely networked across parliament a few days before Budget Day, giving appropriate parliamentarians a chance for informed discussion without inappropriate disclosure (secure discussion is important because it distorts the economy to leak tax rates before they apply). However, the reality is that the sense of theatre surrounding the UK budget speech seem carefully engineered to take the uninformed Leader of the Opposition (who is obliged 'by tradition' to respond instantly to the budget) completely unprepared.

In 1997 the new Chancellor of the incoming government did away with the Nineteenth Century wooden box. This after all was a symbolic opportunity to show the reality of e-democracy to us all, the Information SuperHighway leading not only to the White House, but to Downing Street as well. No longer a box full of papers, but perhaps a networked folder of pdfs, shown first to MPs a day or two before, prior to an intelligent debate in parliament?

In fact the great leap forward in budget information sharing turned out to be – a brand new red wooden box. A politically correct red box of course, made by a trainee on a Skillseekers modern apprenticeship. Quite correctly, this showed the importance placed on skills and training by a government keen on empowering us all to work in a new technological world (and eLiteracy is probably one of these skills in which we need training!). But a wooden box nevertheless.²

It is important not to exaggerate the relevance of British budget day theatricals. In fact the British government has now adopted the practice whereby a "Pre-Budget Report" is presented every year, opening up the Government's Budget plans to comment and scrutiny several months in advance of the Budget itself.³ It is far better to get the symbolism of e-democracy wrong rather than the reality. However, the theatre of budget day remains quite old-fashioned, and its symbolic meaning could be interpreted as showing an acceptance of how governments need to control information flow in debates with parliament and citizens.

An eLiterate democracy would know this and would ask questions about it – the fact that we in the UK do not do so is some sort of measure of the political significance of our collective e-illiteracy. The amusing PR stunt of the new red box could have been mocked as a clumsy piece of old-fashioned political theatre - but it was not. No wonder then that the networks have not delivered better for us.

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the British executive's aspirations to make e-government a top priority. Recent plans for delivering the bread and butter services of UK national government services could not be more ambitious: 100% of British government services are to be online by 2005⁴. But is quicker payment of parking fines the ultimate goal of e-democracy? Isn't e-democracy about higher things as well?

National security is of course a higher thing. Future plans for national ID cards in the UK are to be based on large-scale networked database technology (control technologies to keep people in line are so much more attractive to governments than enabling technologies). However, when it comes to inclusive debates on the high, intractable political issues such as whether we should go to war or not, our collective political discourse reverts back to the technologies of wooden boxes filled with paper, dossiers prepared in confidence and unveiled with the smoke and mirrors of parliamentary theatricals.

The nature of our collective political discourse is the responsibility of all of us. If it is not what it should be – an eLiterate, empowered debate - then we have all failed to make it what it should be. We should acknowledge then that it is a particular tragedy for the politics of the internet that the global debate on terrorism and the decision to wage war in the Middle East has been marked by two singular features: firstly, key democracies did not conduct a compelling discussion about these issues via the media of e-government and the internet; secondly, the real political potential of the uncontainable Net has been opened up by terror groups beaming decapitations into the world's living rooms via website technology. This is not to say anything at all about the rights and wrongs of what the democracies decided to do, it is simply a point about how the debate was conducted. The lesson is as follows: if members of democracies, both citizens and governments alike, do not use the networks to promote real e-democracy (which is something more than faster payment of parking fines), then they leave a void into which the political poisons of the world will drain.

Dare I say it, but our role as information professionals is to engender a culture of expectation for better ways of conducting debate in our nascent e-democracy. We must do this by working to create an eLiterate population of politicians and electors that is competently engaged with social and political debate through the new media. This is of course something to be pursued without miring ourselves in party politics (since all parties can be tempted to think there is advantage to be had from an 'e-illiterate' population). In this way, the promotion of skills by

disinterested information professionals can surely have the highest of social ambitions: to help deliver the democratic potential of the internet.

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Notes

1. Martin, A. What is eLiteracy? < <http://www.iteu.gla.ac.uk/eliteracy/whatiseliteracy.html> > accessed 24th November 2004.
2. Gordon Brown's New Red Box < http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Newsroom_and_Speeches/Press/1997/press_74_97.cfm? > accessed 24th November 2004.
3. FAQ about the UK Budget < <http://www.parliament.uk/faq/budget.cfm> > accessed 24th November 2004.
4. Grossman, Wendy M. 'Are we E-efficient? From paying parking fines to filing tax returns, Tony Blair wants all government services to be fully online by next year.' Independent: Science and Technology. November 24th 2004, p. 11.