

Digital democracy lets you write your own laws

BY MARK RYAN AND GURCHETAN GREWAL

True democracy is not just about casting a vote every four years. It means citizens being fully involved in the proposal, development, and creation of laws. The Commission on Digital Democracy currently being established will consider what part technology can play in helping people to take an active part in the way the country is run.

The commission is setting its sights on "Parliament 2.0," a vision of the future in which citizens participate in online elections, electronic referendums, and richer relationships with their political representatives.

In recent years we've seen technology help people become more involved in debate about all aspects of society. So it is clear that it can play a much greater role in political participation too. As the Commission gets started, it's a good time to think about what we want our digital democracy to look like. There is inspiration to be found all over the web.

Wikipolitics

Technology can enable direct participation in the democratic process, without relying on representatives and without the citizen even needing to leave the comfort of home.

One particularly useful tool in the quest for a digitally engaged electorate will be online forums. These can be built to manage discussions about proposed legislation in a structured way, making it easy for citizens to participate meaningfully.

Politicians and policymakers can use online forums to crowd-source expertise and the views of citizens on their plans—and to refine their proposals based on what they get back. This "direct democracy" would



E-democracy offers a way for citizens to actively formulate the policies of their governments and is being test-driven, in a sense, by online collaborative communities on websites like Wikipedia and Reddit.

allow for laws to be based on genuine citizen deliberation rather than merely aggregating the preferences of citizens into a single vote at the beginning of each electoral cycle.

Wikipedia is an example of how this system might work, but it also shows some of the problems that can arise when technology and democracy mix.

We've seen technology help people become more involved in debate about all aspects of society.

Wikipedia has relatively little capability of coordinating edits, instead allowing editors to work on their own. Despite this decentralized approach, the quality of articles is generally very high. On the down side, edit wars and sock puppetry—when individuals use multiple user identities to create the impression that their views are

shared by others—are an enduring concern.

To help make Wikipedia a trustworthy source, editors can build their reputation by establishing a track record of constructive behaviour. Wikipedia has a hierarchy of users for administrative purposes, based on community approval, but all users are considered to have equally valid opinions regarding Wikipedia content. The emphasis is on building consensus; an arbitration committee deals with disputes that remain unresolved.

Reddit, rate it, vote it

More formal mechanisms are to be found elsewhere online that could help provide the kind of format and structure that might be needed to produce good legislation. In Yahoo! Answers, for example, readers can vote up and vote down contributions made by others. Writers who are voted up gain points that indicate their good reputation. Other question-and-answer forums, such as Reddit and Stack Overflow, use similar mechanisms. This kind of collaboration can be further improved using the kind of real-time simultaneous editing provided by Google docs.

But again, there are perils. Time wasters, product pushers, and disruptive trolls are bad news in online forums and can disrupt the way they operate. In the context of digital democracy, the potential for damage is even higher.

We will need to develop mechanisms that make it possible for everyone to get involved in Parliament 2.0 in a fair and transparent way. This includes preventing abuse by lobbyists, special-interest groups, and extremists, who may try to thwart the mechanisms for non-democratic purposes. Unlike in traditional voting, which provides each person with one vote, we can't presume that everyone will participate in digital democracy equally. That makes it quite difficult to define fairness. It is also difficult to balance accountability (needed to prevent trolling) and privacy (needed to allow free expression).

Online voting

Computer scientists have made great progress in figuring out how online elections could be made secure. One important idea is to design systems that enable outcome verifiability. This would allow citizens to check that the outcome

of an election really does match the votes cast.

To ensure free and fair elections, we also need a property called incorruptibility. This means voters cannot sell their vote, or be forced to vote in a particular way. Online voting systems with these features are being developed by researchers around the world and this will soon change the way we participate in elections. The hope is that, if well-designed and implemented, mechanisms for digital democracy could be built that would greatly increase societal inclusiveness and cohesion, as well as lower the costs of making democracy work.

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Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party

The 'Nine Commentaries' is the book that is disintegrating the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and changing China. This award-winning Epoch Times editorial series discloses the true history and nature of the CCP. Now it is serialized here.

Commentary Five (cont.) On the Collusion of Jiang Zemin and the Chinese Communist Party to Persecute Falun Gong

From a small incident, we can tell how extremely petty and jealous Jiang Zemin is. The Museum of Hemudu Cultural Ruins in Yuyao County (now reclassified as a city), Zhejiang Province, is a major historical and cultural site under state conservation.

Originally, it was Qiao Shi, a political rival of Jiang's, who wrote the signature inscription for the Museum of Hemudu Cultural Ruins. In September 1992, Jiang Zemin saw Qiao Shi's (ii) inscription when he visited the museum, and his face turned dark and gloomy.

The accompanying personnel were very nervous, as they knew that Jiang could not stand Qiao Shi and that Jiang liked to show off so much that he would write an inscription wherever he went, even when he went to visit the traffic police division of the Public Security Bureau in Jinan City and the Zhengzhou City's Retired Engineers Association.

The museum staff dared not slight the petty Jiang Zemin. Consequently, in May 1993, under the excuse of renovation, the museum replaced Qiao Shi's inscription with one of Jiang's before the reopening.

Mao Zedong is said to have "four volumes of profound and powerful writing," whereas the "Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping" has a "cat theory" (iii) with a flavour of practicality. Jiang Zemin exhausted his brain but could only come up with three sentences, yet he claimed to have come up with the doctrine of the Three Represents.

It was published into a book and promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

through level after level of government organizations, yet it only sold because people were forced to buy it. Nevertheless, the Party members still didn't respect Jiang Zemin even a little.

Jiang Zemin fears Falun Gong's moral authority.

They spread gossip about his affair with a singer, the embarrassing episodes of his singing "O Sole Mio" when he travelled abroad and combing his hair in front of the King of Spain.

When the founder of Falun Gong, Mr. Li Hongzhi, who was born an ordinary civilian, gave a lecture, the lecture hall would be filled with professors, experts, and Chinese students studying abroad. Many people with doctorates or master's degrees flew thousands of miles to listen to his lectures.

When Mr. Li lectured eloquently on the stage for several hours, he did it without using any notes. Afterward, the lecture would be transcribed and made into a book for publication. All these things were unbearable to Jiang Zemin, who is vain, jealous, and petty.

Jiang Zemin lives an extremely lavish, lustful, and corrupt life. He spent 900 million yuan (over \$US110 million) to buy a luxurious plane for his own use. Jiang often drew money by the tens of billions of yuan from public funds for his son to do business.

He used nepotism to promote his relatives and minions to high-ranking posts above the ministerial level, and he resorted to desperate and extreme measures in covering up for his cronies' corruption and crimes.

For all these reasons, Jiang is afraid of Falun Gong's moral authority and even more afraid that the topics of heaven, hell, and the principle of good and bad being rewarded accordingly, as addressed by Falun

Gong, are indeed real.

Although Jiang held the greatest power in the CCP in his hands, since he lacked political achievement and talent, he often worried that he would be forced out of power amid the CCP's ruthless power struggles. He is very sensitive about his status as the core of power.

In order to eliminate dissension, he plotted underhanded schemes to get rid of his political enemies Yang Shangkun and Yang's brother Yang Baibing. At the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party Committee (CPC) in 1997 and the 16th National Congress of the CPC in 2002, Jiang forced his opponents to leave their posts.

He, on the other hand, ignored the relevant regulations and clung dearly to his post.

(i) Hemudu Cultural Ruins is an important site from the time of the Chinese New Stone Age. The 7,000 year old village was discovered in 1973.
(ii) Qiao Shi was a former chairman of the Chinese National People's Congress.
(iii) Deng once said, "Black cat or white cat, it's a good cat as long as it catches mice," meaning that the goal of the economic reforms was to bring prosperity to the people, regardless of the form being socialist or capitalist.

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