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## Building on experience By Mitch Ratcliffe

How change in society happens is a mystery that seems clear only in retrospect. In politics, the actual moments when change happens or policy becomes inevitable are the subject of guesswork, and campaign strategy is developed based on past experience that can be proved starkly inadequate in the face of current events. Building tools for doing politics based on the experience of the recent past, particularly the Dean campaign, requires a critical approach that separates the novelty of political engagement from the realities of the political process as it changes and evolves.

Calls for a revolution in politics based on new tools for communicating with other activists will lead to enduring changes that happen in small steps. Political reality has a way of attenuating idealism. It is far more likely that by examining human nature and the ideas about “emergent democracy” in circulation today we can find the bridges between established and novel practices to build on and solidify changes for the better. Trying overthrow the whole system would bring down much more than the political parties and create a dangerous environment in which demagogues could use networked political tools to call for violent reactions to existing and previous inequities.

John Adams, revolutionary and America’s first conservative president, wrote to his longtime political rival and friend Thomas Jefferson of their shared experience of the break with England: “What do we mean by revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years, before a drop

of blood was shed at Lexington.”<sup>1</sup> The revolution in the colonies began on August 5, 1735, in New York, when the trial of John Peter Zenger got underway. Zenger was charged with publishing seditious libels after he criticized the colonial governor in print. Despite the governor’s successful effort to pack the jury with his own cronies, Zenger was acquitted based on the argument that printing the “just complaints of of a number of men” is an essential form of free speech. Instead of pleading “Not Guilty,” Zenger’s lawyer turned the law on its head and admitted Zenger was the publisher of the language in question, and that publishing the charges against the governor was justifiable because it brought a truth to light, a concept that did not exist in Britain. While there were many more steps before the break with England was inevitable, a simple twist on the law ignited the spark that burned all the way to 1776.

In the colonies, the common man had access to the press for the first time. Zenger and his contemporary, Ben Franklin, were communicating across the settled regions of North America. It was the first time egalitarian communication took place on that scale; the French experience shows that the same phenomenon in a society steeped in power and privilege can ignite a wave of vengeance. The tools we build must be applied thoughtfully, in synchrony with the times and used for just ends.

The term “emergent democracy” has appeared to describe the potential for change that exists in the interregnum between the time political professionals were surprised by the new dynamics of the Internet and when they regain management of the national agenda. Emergence is a phenomenon first described by complexity theorists that has been popularized in recent years as describing spontaneous intelligence that appears in a system, whether it is a society, an anthill or a neural network.

“Emergent democracy” is a misapplication of terms, since it implies that political results are emergent properties that rise from the political system rather than a result of contending sources of power in society debating, negotiating and, ultimately, agreeing on a direction that will be shared by all members of society. What I believe emergence theories of social activity are really proposing is that the policies that will structure the activity of society cannot be planned once and executed without any changes to produce a just and engaging world. Flexibility, the hallmark of the networked enterprise, the venue in which most information toolmakers learn their craft, is necessary, though not sufficient, for a living process to be initiated and thrive. The closest anyone has ever come to this ideal in politics were the framers of the

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, John, *The Works of John Adams*, Vol. 10, Little, Brown, Boston, 1956, p. 85.

U.S. Constitution, a document just flexible enough to provide rule of law within a rapidly changing society for 215 years, so far.

Put emergence together with democracy and what do you get? There is no authoritative definition of “emergent democracy.” The phrase has been used to describe self-organizing movements with no apparent leaders, governance based on the input and self-organized projects of the governed, and political action based on groups forming around issues and taking responsibility for enacting policy. All of these phenomena exist in democracy or have existed at moments in history; the real difference between democracy and emergent democracy is the sense of dynamism that erupts at the earliest stages of group formation, what I call “the entrepreneurial moment” when a group of people decide to throw their lots together and try to change the world. It is an entrepreneurial moment due to the huge risks everyone involved must recognize and accept. Will the people at the table with you betray you? Will you hold together in the face of opposition or is there a weak link in the group on whom you cannot count, placing your efforts and reputation at risk for nothing?

These same questions apply whether a movement begins in a cave, a meeting room or an online chat room. They are human questions with as many answers as there are combinations of people. You cannot simply engineer a tool and wipe away these uncertainties. In fact, overcoming the fear of these uncertainties, whether through faith in your comrades or actual experience that proves the mettle of everyone you work with on a campaign—for dogcatcher or president—is an important part of the socialization process that happens within groups.

Because much of the group forming taking place today happens virtually, there is a sense that political boundaries have exploded and that it will be a long time before there is an “establishment” holding the reins of history. Let’s, nonetheless, try to put some boundaries around the concept of emergent democracy to provide a starting point for readers new to the idea.

“Democracy” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “Government by the people; that form of in which the sovereign power resides with the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them (as in the small republics of antiquity) or by officers elected by them. In modern use often more vaguely denoting a social state in which all have equal rights, without hereditary or arbitrary differences of rank or privilege.” To some degree, this definition adds to the fuzziness, since democracy has come to stand for pluralism and egalitarianism as well as government by the people.

Perhaps the adjective “emergent” can lend some clarity? According to the OED, “emergent” is used to describe something that rises out of the surrounding medium, that is in the process of issuing forth or that emerges unpredictably as the result of an evolutionary process. If one understands

“democracy” to mean a system of governance in which people propose competing policies, conduct informed debate and, after a suitable period of deliberation, negotiation and compromise, arrive at a final policy that may or may not bear a strong resemblance to the original proposal, democracy has always been emergent in nature because one could never be sure what would come out of the meat grinder, even when the inputs are clearly understood. Human deliberation remakes ideas and policies, just as evolution redesigns dinosaurs into birds and gives the mammals a turn at dominance. The addition of the Internet to the democratic equation doesn’t add any particular virtues or certainties to democracy, instead it accelerates the rate at which ideas can be disseminated and groups coalesce around ideas to ignite activism.

Emergent democracy has attracted a fair amount of attention for its contention that democratic mechanisms must be found to “rectify the imbalance and inequalities of the world.... [as] basic attributes of democracy ...have eroded as power has become concentrated within corporations and governments,” according to Japanese venture capitalist and activist Joichi Ito. His article, “Emergent Democracy,” along with another paper posted on the World Wide Web, “The Second Superpower Rears its Beautiful Head,” by James F. Moore, a fellow at Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet & Society, have crystallized the idea that an activist population can have a tremendous and trans-national impact on policy and economics. Moore, in particular, has emphasized the post-national qualities of this movement, which is only possible because of the Internet’s instant communication features. “The Internet and other interactive media continue to penetrate more and more deeply all world society, and provide a means for instantaneous personal dialogue and communications across the globe. The collective power of texting, blogging, instant messaging, and email across millions of actors cannot be overestimated,” Moore wrote. He continued:

Like a mind constituted of millions of inter-networked neurons, the social movement is capable of astonishingly rapid and sometimes subtle community consciousness and action. Thus the new superpower demonstrates a form of “emergent democracy” that differs from the participative democracy of the US government. Where political participation in the United States is exercised mainly through rare exercises of voting, participation in the second superpower movement occurs continuously through participation in a variety of web-enabled initiatives. And where deliberation in the first superpower is done primarily by a few elected or appointed officials, deliberation in the second superpower is done by each individual—making sense of events, communicating with others, and deciding whether and how to join in community actions. Finally, where participation in democracy in the first superpower feels remote to most citizens, the emergent democracy of the second superpower is alive with touching and being touched

by each other, as the community works to create wisdom and to take action.

How does the second superpower take action? Not from the top, but from the bottom. That is, it is the strength of the US government that it can centrally collect taxes, and then spend, for example, \$1.2 billion on 1,200 cruise missiles in the first day of the war against Iraq. By contrast, it is the strength of the second superpower that it could mobilize hundreds of small groups of activists to shut down city centers across the United States on that same first day of the war. And that millions of citizens worldwide would take to their streets to rally. The symbol of the first superpower is the eagle—an awesome predator that rules from the skies, preying on mice and small animals. Perhaps the best symbol for the second superpower would be a community of ants. Ants rule from below. And while I may be awed seeing eagles in flight, when ants invade my kitchen they command my attention.

Moore is heavily influenced by the work of sociobiologist E. O. Wilson, whose work with ants is well known and who single-handedly launched several fields of biological research and the notion of an empirical and philosophical continuity between the physical and social sciences. Wilson melds ecology with sociology and psychology in order to show how basic laws can extend across the boundary between the “hard sciences” and “soft” social sciences. However, the theories of behavioral biology are “riddled with semantic ambiguity. Like buildings constructed hastily on unknown ground, they sink, crack, and fall to pieces at a distressing rate for reasons seldom understood by the architects.”<sup>2</sup> This is a very apt description of the problem of erecting an explanation for how society might be changing, as emergent democracy aspires to. Moore previously authored a business book, *The Death of Competition*, which applied Wilson’s ideas to business for the first time. In that book, Moore drew on the ecological metaphor, explaining “executives need to think of themselves as part of organisms participating in an ecosystem in much the same way that biological organisms participate in a biological ecosystem.” Now, he is extending many of these ideas to politics, as well, and ants are a key metaphor for Moore and other emergent democracy theorists.

If it is hard to find satisfactory definitions of emergent democracy and the ideas themselves are, at this point, a “hypothesis in need of confirmation,”<sup>3</sup> it is even harder to avoid sweeping generalizations about human and physical nature when talking about emergent democracy. The metaphors offered by emergence and emergent democracy theorists should be taken with a saltshaker rather than one grain of skepticism. It is very easy to confuse biology with the complex interactions of society, divorcing the “socio-”

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<sup>2</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology, The Abridged Edition*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1980, p. 15

<sup>3</sup> Email correspondence with Mitch Ratcliffe, from David S. Isenberg Ph.D., January 5, 2004

Wilson added to the root “biology” in order to make a metaphor crystalline. Metaphors unfortunately often ignore the details of life to capture the sense of events and so it is with emergence and ants.

Ant metaphors and discussions of emergence frequently tread into the dicey territory of over-simplification, where individual volition and acts of leadership are discounted.

A lot of people loathe E. O. Wilson because he had the audacity to combine the social and biological in an attempt to draw a complete picture of the factors that drive the development of species, including Homo Sapiens. During early public discussions of sociobiology in the 1970s, Wilson was attacked and, on one occasion, doused with ice water by angry scientists, because people believed he was arguing for biological determinism that prevents the exercise of free will. Biologist Stephen J. Gould remained a lifelong and vociferous rival of Wilson's, accusing Wilson of reducing all human potential to outcomes based on the random combination of DNA. Actually, Wilson has repeatedly refuted that he advocates a biological determinism. In *On Human Nature*, Wilson wrote “cultural change is the statistical product of the separate behavioral responses of large numbers of human beings who cope as best they can with social existence.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, while you can assess the behavior of populations statistically and make predictions about what will happen to that society, the free will of individuals decides the actual contours of history.

At the same time, a little determinism is a good thing and we live comfortably in a largely deterministic world. Philosopher Daniel Dennett argues that the fact our options are bounded by past decisions and, in part, because of our genetic heritage, we enjoy a profound freedom of action, since a largely deterministic world allows us to assess options and expected outcomes with a high degree of confidence<sup>5</sup>. If sheep occasionally flew or

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<sup>4</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1978, p. 78

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, Viking, New York, 2003, p. 25: “Determinism is the thesis that “there is at any instance exactly one physically possible future” (Van Inwagen 1983, p. 3). This is not a particularly difficult idea, one would think, but it’s amazing how often even very thoughtful writers get it flat wrong. First, many thinkers assume that determinism implies inevitability. It doesn’t. Second, many think it is obvious that indeterminism—the denial of determinism—would give us agents some freedom, some maneuverability, some elbow room, that we just couldn’t have in a deterministic universe. It wouldn’t. Third, it is commonly supposed that in a deterministic world, there are no *real* options, only apparent options. This is false. Really? I have just contradicted three themes so central to discussions of free will, and so seldom challenged, that many readers suppose I am kidding, or using these words in some esoteric sense. No, I am claiming that the

water unexpectedly passed through the face of a dam, deciding about future allocation of resources among, and the rights and responsibilities of, citizens would be far less organized.

The very idea of a deterministic world offends many people for all the wrong reasons. If genetics did not determine the combinations of cells produced in the womb, would Christians be satisfied to give birth to marmosets? If the laws of physics in the dimensions we inhabit were broken with the same ease they are in several quantum dimensions, would there be civilization or fire to cook our food and heat our homes, if those homes would even stand up? If God were to offer to reverse time, allowing the ultimate victory of Islam over Christianity in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, would an observant Muslim living in Mecca today be willing to forego his very existence (and all the eternal rewards that go with it) because that triumph wiped out his family and nullified any chance of his birth a thousand years before? A nondeterministic world is the world of science fiction, the scariest science fiction, where nothing can be predicted and clear-cut choices intended to create paradise land us in Hell.

The largely deterministic world costs us, too. From the moment we are born to the day we die we have to make decisions that involve forgoing one opportunity in pursuit of another. This is not a world made for people who can't get over buyer's remorse, yet it is filled with ideologues who argue that they have not, in fact, missed opportunities and only made the right decisions along the way.

Since time's arrow flies the way it does and we have a limited number of opportunities for instigating change in a human lifetime, leadership is particularly important in getting political movements underway. Someone somewhere has to get people moving in the same direction. Not so with theories of emergence that claim order emerges from chaotic behavior among members of a society. E. O. Wilson and Bert Hölldobler went to great lengths to counter the tendency of previous researchers to anthropomorphism when describing ant societies. Yet, because their book, *The Ants*, is considered one of the foundational texts of social emergence, their work has been used to justify an ant metaphor for human behavior that presumes there is no leadership in the ant world.

Ants are an important example for Joichi Ito and the emergent democracy group he formed, as well. Ito quotes author Steven Johnson, who draws heavily on other ant studies to describe emergent phenomena:

In the book *Emergence*, Steven Johnson writes about harvester ant colonies, which exhibit an amazing ability to solve very difficult problems including geometry problems. The following exchange is from an interview with Deborah Gordon who studies ants.

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complacency with which these theses are commonly granted without argument is itself a large mistake."

She says, “Look at what actually happened here: they've built the cemetery at exactly the point that's furthest away from the colony. And the midden is even more interesting: they've put it at precisely the point that maximizes its distance from both the colony and the cemetery. It's like there's a rule they're following: put the dead ants as far away as possible, and put the midden as far away as possible without putting it near the dead ants.”

Johnson explains that there is no ant in charge. The ants' solving of such problems is emergent behavior that comes from their following very simple rules and having several ways to interact with their immediate surroundings and neighbors.

The human fetus develops into a higher level of order through this principle of following a set of rules and interacting with its immediate neighbors. When the first cell divides into two, one half becomes the head side and the other the tail. The next time it divides, the quarters determine whether they are to be the head or the tail, and they become the head of the head, or the tail of the head, and so on. This division and specialization continues until in very short order the cells have created a complex human body. The liver cells know to turn into liver cells by sensing that their neighbors are also liver cells and reading the DNA code to understand exactly what it is supposed to do. There is no omniscient control, but just a huge number of independent cells following rules and communicating with and sensing the state of their neighbors.

There is a two-fold paradox in the emergent democracy movement, largely because it is focused on the mechanisms and outcomes of democracy rather than the inputs to the system, i.e. human action. The paradox hinges on the notion that activity in non-human systems, such as nature (though we are very much a part of nature, only living in mental exile from it), is random and miraculously gives rise to coherent emergent behavior.

Virtually every ant metaphor ignores the role of power or leadership, the very essence of politics. In fact many proponents of the idea of emergent democracy dismiss these qualities and insist there is no leader and no power at the individual level, that, in fact, power resides only with the group. Yet, Wilson and Bert Hölldobler's *The Ants* makes plain that the activity of ants is not in the slightest bit random, it is highly stylized and clearly intentional. An individual ant does a variety of things with its body—in fact, it is equipped with an arsenal of glands and sensors that are used to communicate—to interact with other ants.

The reality is that each ant is at any moment a potential leader. In Moore's memorable and accurate phrase, “Ants rule from the bottom up.” They find some food and lay down a path of pheromones back to the nest, which



others can follow to retrieve more food. Each successive ant to follow various trails makes changes, contributing to complex outcomes like the location of the midden (the trash heap) relative to the colony. Little acts that are simply too simple for us to attribute intelligence to add up to recognizably organized systems. We want to impose an order on what is produced, but the order is the product of many small intentions.

Emergence, to a great degree, is simply what we didn't plan. How to arrive at the best possible unplanned outcome is what emergent democracy is about. This is what is meant when people talk about "the edge taking charge" or "decision-making at the edge of the network." Instead of centralized planning, emergent democracy describes being involved in a conversation with ideas coming from many more quarters than in a slow analog debate where a central figure filters most ideas before presenting them to the community and few in the community have an opportunity to contribute their perspective.

The atomic actions of human society are more complex, at least they seem so to us humans, but most of our decisions are unplanned and not based on the goals or milestones of overarching rational plan. We become unconstructively reductive when we say that ant behavior is random because it is unlike how we organize ourselves, since there is undoubtedly some form of society among ants. The tools we use to link up as people engaged in collective action are metaphorically like the substances that cellular units of the brain or an ant colony or any collectively intelligent aggregate of non-intelligent (in the human sense) use to communicate. Yet the minds sitting in front of the screen at a node in the network are much more complex than ants or brain cells, blending as they do genetic and sociological factors in every decision.

During one emergent democracy "happening" (the term Ross Mayfield applied to Joi's multi-channel meetings that included telephone, Web chat and wiki interfaces), it was suggested that people want to know about other people so that they can vet the credentials of those who are attempting to lead them, even in the case of a "smart mob" such as the Philippine crowd action that led to the end of the scandal-ridden presidency of Joseph Estrada. Author Howard Rheingold coined the term "smart mob" to describe how a self-organizing group using text messaging on wireless phones coalesced into a second instance of "People Power" ending a Filipino regime. A colleague on the call responded, "Isn't the point that there is no leader?" Well, no.

Each citizen is a potential leader in a democracy; in an extreme democracy citizens needn't only join a great campaign for president or governor, but will have the tools that those campaigns have had at their fingertips to address local and international issues from a networked computer. They'll have a printing press, a campaign database that draws on public information to build voter lists quickly and accurately, the technology to support discussion and policy debates, to interact with other activists and blend their efforts, and to raise funds. Each citizen will have the choice to lead when the issue is one they care about passionately.

Leadership is essential to coordinated action, whether it is in political, economic, social, theological or military matters. What we must keep in mind when exploring the ideas of emergent democracy is that the ease of communication today is just one factor in the changing panorama of political evolution. At each moment a different person might be leading the way.

Emergent democracy, then, is a way of describing the experience of the democratic process at the speed of the information age, but it is not a comprehensive political philosophy. Just as business processes and fads carried by electronic media can sweep through an organization or a teenaged population, respectively, an idea can change the world more quickly than ever before. Today, ideas and movements can come from any quarter of society and spread through activists and mavens to influence great ships of state. It feels new, because it is such raw experience of the power of democratic activism, but the processes are as familiar and human as the stories we tell our children about better worlds and their ability to achieve their dreams.

A political philosophy must incorporate more than the experience of participation. An analysis of power, definite ideas about the role of the citizen and the government, and the principles society will embrace about the value of the individual are required, as well. Extreme democracy seeks to provide these foundational ideas to place the thrill of emergent organizations into socio-political context.

Traditional ideas of political organization are based on concentric spheres of democratic action, from the direct to the representative, because democracy does not scale smoothly from small to large societies. A village or organization in which members can talk together frequently can practice a form of direct democracy while a small city will require some system of representation to keep abreast of the many issues, from school funding and filling potholes to providing funding for police and licensing businesses and automobiles. What works in a city will grind to a halt when applied to a region or nation, because of the variety of functions government fulfills across large geographic areas.

Networked society, however, is not constrained by geography. A group can spring up around a common need or idea without regard to the distance between members. The most profound political changes have been wrought by groups that found bonds or maintained bonds across great distance to forge movements, but it was slow and much more difficult to maintain a critical level of engagement when each passage in a debate could take weeks to reach all participants. Even after the appearance of electronic communications, like radio, political communication has taken place at a slower pace than normal conversation—it was encrypted or, to hide the fact that communication was taking place.

Extreme democracy takes place in real-time. Power is diffused because the traditional gatekeepers are dethroned. Ironically, the press, the institution that has contributed most to the disruption of power in recent history, is on the receiving end of the disruption represented by emergent democracy. The power to make oneself or one's organization heard has never been so available. Let us refer to this as the power of promotion. Each citizen still has a single vote, but they can by publishing on the Web amplify their opinions to reach the public attention more frequently than ever. As the Howard Dean campaign demonstrated, the power of the press to set the agenda of the campaign was undermined by a distributed organization; as a corollary to the power of promotion, the Dean campaign also shows that with promotional tools a campaign can collect more money faster, from smaller donors, than ever before. By organizing through networks, massive movements can be manufactured by a few dedicated individuals without—for the first time—having to have the wherewithal to travel to conduct organizing activity.

To understand the impact of the obliteration of geography, we have to take some time with the idea of network theory, a relatively new science that seeks to describe how ideas and influence travel across society through recognizable interconnections between groups; your most engaging friend is likely one of these interconnections, as skilled communicators are frequently the most responsible for spreading ideas.

Networks and their effects on human relationships have been the subject of intense study for only a few years, but theorists propose a wide range of rules that describe the behavior of connected people, networked groups and organizations. These laws are double-edged blades for the aspiring social theorist since a "law" in the scientific sense when applied to groups of people is an appeal to reason in nature that may not exist in the population one is describing; people can act irrationally or inconsistently in similar circumstances, defying the "law" apparently at will. Despite the fact that the mathematics of networks are generally couched in value-neutrality, the absence of influence and the notion of frictionless transaction, they are projected onto a value-filled social networks of influence characterized by many forms of friction. Network theory is useful, however, because it highlights the singular importance of influence and leadership within social and political networks.

The issue of scale<sup>6</sup>, which in mathematics describes the place of any numerical expression relative to a chosen base, is applicable in social and political networking. In social situations, we can think of scale as the number of steps it takes to accomplish a goal, how many people in city hall do you have to talk to in order to get your sidewalk repaired? How many people can

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<sup>6</sup> Barabási, Albert-László, *Linked, How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life*, Plume Penguin, 2003. P. 70.

fit into the local Starbucks before you have to build another one? Scaling issues are very important to any investment of social, political or economic capital, yet they are disorienting, too, because the limits of human networks only become evident when they are reached, the point of diminishing returns when progress is halted or each additional step becomes more expensive than the one before. The critical mistake for many investors and managers working at Internet companies during the bubble years was assuming that any investment would pay itself back in multiples, when, in fact, many of the steps companies took led to unprofitable customers who weren't willing to pay a premium for the convenience of, for example, buying dog food on the Web.

In political networks, limits make themselves known in two ways, as a negative, the void that opens when a community no longer scales efficiently, and in extraordinary exceptions to the limits that prove the rule in all other circumstances.

Failure to scale is evident when people feel disenfranchised, when they no longer have sufficient contact or interaction with their government to see their wishes reflected in its actions. Another form of negative experience of limits is the self-dealing that takes place when a politician no longer feels accountable to constituents. We are familiar with and react against the notion of power as it is exercised by individuals for their own benefit—perhaps a mayor starts dealing local favors to statewide interests to gain leverage in an upcoming election or perhaps someone just sells their vote for money; at these times, individual politicians impose limits on group action by sucking away resources for themselves. Everyone has a story of a politician who, seeing only their own well-being, sacrificed the common good to maintain their power and privilege. Everyone knows someone who has monopolized connections for their benefit at the expense of others; it happens in business, churches and school, as well as in politics.

British anthropologist Robin Dunbar suggests a “rule of 150,” a scale that explains how our brains are hardwired to deal effectively with no more than 148.4 people.<sup>7</sup> This idea, that we are not capable of exceeding these numbers of relationships over long periods, is borne out by experience, as most people find their group of friends and colleagues changing over time.

The other experience of scale is intimately tied to these types of networking limits. It is only the very industrious, like President George H. W. Bush, who wrote notes to thousands of people annually in order to sustain social obligations, that seem able to marshal large networks of social relationships to political ends, to burst through limits that confine others. Historian Kevin Phillips demonstrates how exceptions to social rules, like the rule of 150, can thrive, writing of both presidential Bushes: “Father and son also had a striking ability to remember people’s names and faces and to memorize

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<sup>7</sup> R. I. M. Dunbar, “Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates,” *Journal of Human Evolution*, 1992, vol. 20, pp. 469-493.

things, especially baseball batting orders, starting lineups, and fraternity members. For both—and apparently for [George H.W.’s father] Prescott Bush and Great-grandfather Bush, too—unusual memory was a great asset, both in retail politicking and in retaining data and information.”<sup>8</sup> The exception proves the rule, as simply being able to remember and manage more than 150 relationships can have huge social results. A memory for facts alone would be largely useless socially, in fact it generally alienates people from others because they are perceived as know-it-alls. But a memory for faces and names is a social tool that can be used to flatter and coax cooperation from others.

In smaller groups, such as among close-knit groups or a successful team, the numbers of intense relationships a person can maintain are more restricted. For many years social researchers emphasized these tighter social ties, or “strong ties,” when trying to assess the optimum size of a group. Then, along came a social researcher named Marc Granovetter, who was intrigued by studies conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram. During a string of groundbreaking research projects during the 1960s, Milgram unearthed evidence of “small world” relationships among very large networks of people.

Stanley Milgram’s famous, though not most infamous, experiment on social ties, in which he asked people to try to get a letter to one of several targets by going through a network of acquaintances to find a personal connection to the target, provided the well-worn concept of “six degrees of separation.” This is the idea that, on average, each person is approximately six social steps away from anyone else in the world. By asking a friend if they know a friend of someone we’d like to meet, according to this idea, we would find that the target was between four and eleven introductions away, with the average being six steps, or degrees. Milgram’s 1967 experiment, which identified the “small world problem” (after the “It’s a small world” uttered by people who learn they have an acquaintance in common) as a field ripe for investigation, was the basis of another breakthrough piece of research by Mark Granovetter, who established that “weak ties,” those ties that are not central to the function of groups but happen to link clusters of people, are the primary vectors of the experience of small worlds. It is the person who is able to leap barriers between two groups who is critical to the success of a six-degrees chain. This explains the political success of the otherwise singularly uninspiring Bush family, which, as Kevin Phillips points out “have produced no college presidents or stonemasons, no scientists or plumbing contractors—generally speaking, their progeny have become almost exclusively financial entrepreneurs.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin Phillips, *American Dynasty*, Viking, New York, 2003, p. 44

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, *American Dynasty*, p. 45

Scale issues can be managed using the carefully composed messages in a heavily mediated society, where most policy issues are experienced as events on television and abstracted from day-to-day life, people become inured to abuses and cynical about them. When the news leads each day with bad news, common sense suggests that people tend to remember bad news more often than good behavior.

But in politics, when people are engaged, when they feel there is something at stake, whether it's their local school district or a national campaign for president, the opposite is true: A few small positives will outweigh a lot of bad news. In gambling, another human practice as old as society and probably older than politics, in a lottery or at the craps table people focus on the few moments of good luck. You've seen people win in Las Vegas, even though the vast majority of people lose in Las Vegas? You remember those moments more than the losses, because we want to win or see people win; we want the best for others or we might envy their success. Casinos, like the mediascape, are designed to enhance the impression of success. When a player at the craps table is handed the dice, the chances are only 2.675 percent that they will be able to set a point on the first roll and throw a seven to win on the subsequent roll.<sup>10</sup> Awful chances, but the room is open and carries sound well in order to broadcast the sound of success from one of the hundred tables in the casino (where the odds suggest, someone will be winning almost all the time), along with the ringing bells of slot machines, all to reinforce the sense that everyone wins at least some of the time. This reduces the sense that the odds are against you, just as intense media coverage of stories of the party you support winning, good works, luck and profit (especially the state lottery, which features a winner on the weekly drawing, but ignores the millions of losers). Television news is a casino, with enough good news and distractions (squirrels that water ski) to inure the viewer to the bad news, that they lost the school levy vote or that their candidate isn't being covered. News directors don't design the news for this effect, rather it is what they are told works by the people who own the television networks, who study places like Las Vegas to figure out how to hold people's attention.

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<sup>10</sup> Krigman, Alan, Why It's Easy to Believe Rare Events Happen All the Time, Casino City Times, July 8, 2003.

<http://krigman.casinocitytimes.com/articles/6106.html>: "The likelihood that a shooter will establish a point and throw a seven on the subsequent roll is  $24/36$  multiplied by  $6/36$ . This equals 11.11 percent. In round numbers, it's 11 chances out of 100 for any shooter. And the probability it'll take place several times in a row is 12 out of 1,000 for two, 14 out of 10,000 for three, and 15 out of 100,000 for four. Chances are lower of Come bettors getting up on three numbers in consecutive rolls, then striking out on the fourth. Probability is 2.675 percent. This is roughly 27 chances out of 1,000 for any shooter, 7 out of 10,000 for two in a row, and 2 out of 100,000 for a terrible trifecta."

And, in politics, there is legitimately good news to report; good people do step up regularly and volunteer to benefit others, school levies pass and heroic sacrifices are made by police officers, teachers and even politicians, so there is enough good news to make most people who feel disenfranchised feel pretty good about humans. Cincinnatus, a patrician farmer, was called to be dictator of Rome and set the example for the office, which held total power, by finishing the task of defending Rome and foregoing power to return to his farm. Livy relates this act thousands of years later and it seems extraordinary, but people make these kinds of selfless sacrifices in many ways all the time.

Total power is in our hands on many occasions, over life and death, promotion and being stuck in a dead-end job, and the ability to make life better or worse for others while our privileged situation is unaffected. Manipulation or, more benignly, management of perception has everything to do with the use to which we put our networks, and that is what is missing from the analysis by most network theories. That is what is changing most with the rise of the networked society as the cost of communication and managing information falls dramatically each year.

Now the Internet has given a voice to concerns that political systems are no longer producing the results that keep the people happy or, at least, pacified, and this has taken the political world by surprise. The speed and ease of making connections, while fleeting, can produce substantial emotional and political momentum. The persistent network of weak ties George H. W. Bush accomplished through sheer determination and tens of thousands of pens and uncounted reams of notepaper the ordinary citizen can accomplish using email lists, blog and simple syndication technology, It still requires determination and persistence, but is much more efficient. Inflamed passions, like the outrage felt by Sims who believe they have been denied the right to free speech, can catalyze decisive political action. The Howard Dean campaign focused a broad-based frustration with the George W. Bush administration.

In Korea, Roh Moo-hyun, a failed national assembly candidate in 2000, and 300 supporters, allegedly used the Internet to raise \$1 billion from 180,000 Koreans and win the 2002 presidential election on a wave of reform messages. Roh promised that "If I am elected, I will put an end to the old politics and usher in a new Korea and a new era of politics in Korea. The old politics, the 20th Century politics, the Three-Kim (Kim Young Sam, Kim Dae Jung, and Kim Jong Pil) conservatism, regionalism, cronyism, factionalism, confrontational conflicts, and corruption in high places shall be no more. Instead, a new political era of pan-national cohesion, true participatory democracy, people-centered government, clean government, and a brand-new 21st Century government will be ushered in." The passions of Koreans were ignited and Roh swept into office. During 2003, Roh was

revealed to have accepted large donations from corporations and to have hidden the donations.<sup>11</sup> As voters seek Net-savvy candidates, they need to be aware that the billing isn't always as good as it is with the show playing behind the door.

Speed politics and new technology meet the greatest resistance at the walls of the old system. During the 1990s, politicians routinely discounted email input from the public, saying privately that it took little investment of time or thought to create an electronic message compared to the investment required to write a letter and mail it. When the Clinton administration introduced its White House email addresses, the first in history, it said: "Initially, your e-mail message will be read and receipt immediately acknowledged. A careful count will be taken on the number received as well as the subject of each message. However, the White House is not yet capable of sending back a tailored response via electronic mail. We are hoping this will happen by the end of the year."<sup>12</sup>

The White House experimented with a number of automated systems for tallying public input, but did not actually read individual messages for content, instead treating them like votes in a poll. This isn't significantly different than postal mail or faxes sent to the White House, but the expectation of people sending messages to the White House is that their words will be read and absorbed. Writing an email may take as long as writing a letter, but because an email could easily be copied and sent a thousand times at virtually no cost, White House or Congressional staff discounted the value of each email received.

According to a Clinton Administration official who worked on the email project, there were several important barriers to email's acceptance as a valid reflection of public sentiment. At first, in 1993 and 1994, the White House assumed that, based on the rather elite demographics of Internet users at the time, that email reflected only a fragment of society. But that changed rapidly as companies like America Online and Prodigy "were forced to open pipes to the Internet so that customers could directly access [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) as well as send email directly to President Clinton."<sup>13</sup> Government, in addition to being impacted by technology, can lead the way toward wider adoption of technology.

Behind the fence at the White House, however, there was a cadre of career staff that resisted email, because they had spent many years processing

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<sup>11</sup> Na Jeong-ju, "Roh aware of Illegal Funds," *The Korea Times*, December 29, 2003.

<http://times.hankooki.com/lpage/200312/kt2003122917280610440.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Office of Presidential Correspondence, Letter from the President and Vice President in announcement of White House electronic mail access, June 1, 1993

<sup>13</sup> From private email, information provided by former Clinton aide on a background basis



constituent messages via postal mail and telephone calls. This was the main source of the “it takes greater commitment of time and effort to pen a letter” sentiment that often seeped out to the public and that Web activists glommed onto as a consistent sore point. “I’m sure the percentage of ranting and the [ratio] of frivolous to the sober and the thoughtful was comparable among all avenues of communication,” the official said. He related how when President Clinton gave a major speech he helped man the telephone lines since no such effort was needed for email input. A drunken caller took 15 minutes of his time, allowing him time to take only a few calls that evening—the total number of calls handled was in the hundreds, while the White House received more than 20,000 emails a day at the time.

By 2001, most U.S. federal government agencies had a Web site to promote policy to the public and almost 95 percent of local governments were coming online with their own sites.<sup>14</sup> The impact of public input via the Web was virtually nil, as most email was simply ignored in many government offices. At the White House, a sampling of emails is provided to the President for review, but only a summary view is possible. The Congressional Management Foundation suggested that representatives are being buried in what are, because they come from non-constituents, extraneous emails: “The public’s expectation to receive responses from Members who do not represent them is like their showing up at the town hall meeting and demanding to be treated like a constituent. Members’ inefficient and unresponsive e-mail practices are akin to keeping constituents waiting in long lines for hours before letting them into the town hall meeting. Instead of fostering democracy, these conflicting practices and expectations of all the parties are fostering cynicism and eroding trust.”<sup>15</sup> Granted, blaming activists for using cheap and easy email to make as much noise as possible is rather missing the point, that when people have an opportunity to be heard they take it. The result was an immediate and almost total neutering of individual email as a form of political expression.

Activists realized that email could be used to exert political force in the aggregate and, often, in forms of contact with political representatives that are relatively old-fashioned. One of the first substantial protests coordinated by email was MoveOn.org’s Virtual March on Washington on February 26, 2003, when more than a half million people phoned and faxed Congress with messages demanding an alternative to the invasion of Iraq. The protest was highly coordinated, with individuals assigned specific times to call.<sup>16</sup> OpenDemocracy, a U.K.-based group, developed coordinated mailing and calling campaigns in Europe and helped activist establish physical gatherings

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<sup>14</sup> International City/Council Management Association

<sup>15</sup> “E-mail Overload in Congress,” A report of the Congress Online Project, a partnership of the Congressional Management Foundation and George Washington University, <http://www.congressonlineproject.org/email.html>

<sup>16</sup> Alan Elsner, “Virtual’ War Protest Jams Congressional Phones,” Reuters, February 26, 2003.

in support of peaceful solutions to the Iraq showdown and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, among other international campaigns. Tying up government phones is an extremely effective way to get attention, even if it doesn't stop wars—this is very early action in a new political strategy.

In the United Kingdom, the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair has launched an aggressive program, called “The Big Conversation,” to bring parliamentarians and bureaucrats into a dialogue with citizens. This is an important departure from the notion that email is a form of polling. The Big Conversation depends on citizens submitting policy suggestions for discussion among Labour Party members—the old process of building a party platform, in which many of the important compromises necessary to build a broad coalition are hammered out, is being reborn on the Web.

Individual insurgents, too, have found the Web is better than owning a press in the revolutionary era. When Senator Trent Lott stood up at retiring Senator Strom Thurmond's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party and said, ““I want to say this about my state: when Strom Thurmond ran for President, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either,” the press at large ignored the statement, but a number of bloggers, people publishing their ideas on a Web page arranged in reverse-chronological order (the last posting appears at the top and others are arranged by descending date order on pages that can go on for many screens worth of data), offended at this endorsement of segregation, were enraged. Bloggers like InstaPundit Glenn Reynolds and Josh Marshall of Talking Points Memo compiled documentary evidence that Lott, who immediately apologized for the comments, had actually been saying exactly the same thing for decades. If Lott was sorry now, why was he repeating himself after having said the same thing about Thurmond, who argued in the 1948 presidential election, when he ran as a third-party “Dixiecrat” candidate that federal law and troops “cannot force the Negro into our homes, schools, our churches,” several times between 1965 and 2002? Refusing to let the story die, the bloggers forced a national debate that resulted in Lott's resignation as Senate Majority Leader.

In the case of Trent Lott, the public led the pundits. As CNN reported:

If Lott didn't see the storm coming, it was in part because it was so slow in building. The papers did not make note of his comments until days after he had made them. But the stillness was broken by the hum of Internet “bloggers” who were posting their outrage and compiling rap sheets of Lott's earlier comments. It took a few more days before Democrats denounced Lott and demanded a censure.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Dan Goodgame and Karen Tumulty, Lott: Tripped up by history, *cnn.com*, December 16, 2002.  
<http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/12/16/timep.lott.tm/>

That a few people with Web presence and, comparatively speaking, small audiences, though very large social networks, could carry such weight in national politics was a stark reminder of the role of the press in the American Revolution, when a few key publishers repeated the messages that ignited an insurrection. Bloggers are powerful conduits for ideas because, like George H. W. Bush and his personal note-based network, connections can be activated with a few well-chosen words. This ability to build a social network that is available when an issue of importance arises is as important today as the power of the press in the pre-Revolutionary era in America and France, when wits and ideologues like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Jean-Paul Marat could inflame regions with a publication that, if it found success with local audiences was recirculated across the entire country. Likewise, the samizdat press of Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe, which operated on a network of readers who passed along mimeographed and photocopied pamphlets, toppled a totalitarian government by keeping ideas alive and circulating. Focal points in society like these bloggers can, if supported by action, produce dramatic results.

As Mohandas K. Gandhi said, "One cannot unite a community without a newspaper or journal of some kind." These separate trends of individual expression through blogs, an egalitarian journalism, and organized online activism are waking unrecognized communities of interest that will confound a political system designed for representation of geographic constituencies. A concerted effort by the peoples of the world can transform the perception of the means and ends of government. Meanwhile, politics, the art of participation in social decision-making and a practice closely related to being "polite," which means to achieve refinement, continues to function essentially as it has throughout history, through debate and compromise among people.

An answer to the continuing debate about political process will be based on the integration of many, though not all, threads in recent human development into an expanded concept of the individual as the basis for the concept of sovereignty and the redefinition of the role of government institutions in order to revitalize political processes. A political philosophy must incorporate more than the experience of participation. An analysis of power, definite ideas about the role of the citizen and the government, and the principles society will embrace about the value of the individual are required, as well. Extreme democracy seeks to provide these foundational ideas to place the thrill of emergent organizations into socio-political context.