# Broadcasting and the Voter’s Paradox

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Voting is gloriously paradoxical. Each person gets one and only one vote, equal to everyone else’s. When we vote, we are mere faces in the crowd, yet we rejoice in our mere-ness. Yet with that one vote, we express what is unique about us. What other binary choice engenders such endless discussion? And am I the only person who has choked up in a voting booth from the weight of mere-ness expressing uniqueness?

Voting is paradoxical only because we normally resent being reduced to being members of a faceless crowd. “I am not a numbah!” as the hero of the cheesily existentialist UK show *The Prisoner* used to say. We especially resent it when the organization treating us as just another wallet pretends otherwise. “Your call is important to us”: Then why don’t you pick up the !@#$%-ing phone? “Dear YOUR NAME IN CAPS”: Who do you think you’re fooling?

Yet most of our interactions with large businesses suffer from the robotic-bonhomie of the junk mail salutation. What choice do they have? Employees at Prell shampoo can’t hand-write letters to all 50 million users. Volkswagen can’t tape a different commercial for each viewer. So, of course companies have to resort to marketing to demographic slices that reduce people to quantifiable properties they have in common: Urban church-going women age 18-24, male snow-boarding thumb-suckers age 45-54. Of course.

This type of mass communication is epitomized by broadcasting: a single message going out to a whole lot of people who are understood by what they have in common, not by what makes them unique and different. Not just TV and radio networks are broadcasters. By this definition, so are newspaper and magazine publishers.

And so are politicians.

That’s where the Internet offers a difference. Perhaps masses of people can be reached without broadcasting. If so, then marketing and commerce will change. But so will politics and governance.

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When the Web started to become popular in the mid-90s, one of the first questions was: Would banner ads cut into TV advertising revenues? Would people switch from slick Hollywood products to homegrown programming? Would people stop watching TV and instead surf all the live long day? What would become of broadcasting?

Broadcasting has survived the Internet, even though the Internet seems to be partially responsible for reducing the viewership of network television. But this isn't merely about whether the attractions of the online world can peel back the number of people watching TV, for broadcasting isn't simply a technological solution to a communications problem. It's got economic, societal, political and governmental implications. Indeed, there's a sense in which broadcasting has given us a fundamental way of understanding how society operates. The biggest effect the Internet will have on broadcasting is on its dominance as a social metaphor.

Broadcasting is, in fact, a poor paradigm for communications. It allows only one person to speak at a time and, by itself, gives no way effective for the huddled masses to respond. If broadcasting didn't exist, and if money and technology were no obstacle, you might build a broadcast network, but you would reserve it for specialized uses; for example, it would make an excellent emergency notification system. Otherwise, you would probably not invest much in a national broadcast infrastructure like the one we have now, preferring something more regional, more interactive, and more open to the initiative of citizens. Unless your country were a monarchy, of course: Monarchies and broadcasting are a natural match.

We have a national broadcast system not because it's ideal but because it solved some problems of the day. Sending out electromagnetic waves was expensive, requiring a major investment of capital. So, companies were guaranteed a limit on competition in geographic regions, not only to prevent "interference" but also to entice them to risk their money building networks. Thus were channels born. But because it was such an expensive undertaking, the size of the audience had to be maximized. This meant that the field favored large companies. Hence the circumstances that made broadcasting appealing also tended to scale audiences up and scale the number of broadcasters down: if your program can reach more people, it is worth more to advertisers.

The economics were sound but the politics are dismal. Broadcasting works against the ideals of democracy.

Sure, having cheap or free access to news programming helps to keep a democratic citizenry informed. But we have seen a relentless degradation of news programming thanks to the economics of broadcasting: In their pursuit of ever larger audiences, broadcasters turn news into entertainment. This may not be inevitable, but it is what has happened.

Worse, the economic need to scale up a broadcast – to increase its viewership – has narrowed the range of acceptable opinion. There's a reason why extremist newsweeklies are handed out for free on a just a few street corners while you can hardly spin around without seeing a place to buy a copy of *USAToday*. Your broadcast business will do better if it upholds the values, ideas and opinions of the broadest swath of the market.

Of course, broadcast media, including newspapers, don't just reflect public mores. They also create them. Network television tells us what words are now acceptable: I know that "fart" and "suck" are ok because I hear them on sitcoms. Likewise, newspapers not only inform us about what's going on in the world, they also tell us what sorts of things our municipality finds interesting and acceptable. Reflecting and forming: That's the dialectic of broadcast media.

So, broadcasting is inherently anti-democratic not just because it gives special privilege to the ideas of a moneyed elite, but because its economics leads to a narrowing of opinion: there's only one socialist columnist in a major daily newspaper today because people don't want to read socialists, in part because the newspapers – anticipating and forming our tastes – don't run socialist columnists. (Sometimes the dialectic runs in a circle.)

But democracy was founded by enlightened rationalists who thought that truth emerges from vigorous debate. Limit that debate and not only might good ideas go unborn, but one's own ideas are weakened by the lack of challenge. If democracy was invented in order to resolve the problem that a nation comprehends

a diversity of will, smoothing out that diversity weakens democracy. A nation with only one opinion doesn't really need democracy. Yet that is almost where we are today.

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The presidential election of 2004, and particularly the Howard Dean campaign, taught us something important. Remember those 50 million Prell users? The CEO of Prell can't possibly have a real, human relationship with each of them. But now we can see how to scale individual relationships even with an organization dealing with millions of us. We can't all talk with the CEO of Prell, and we couldn't all have a real email correspondence with Howard Dean. But we could with one another. And that seems to count for a lot.

When people first started thinking about how the Internet could be used in national campaigns, a couple of ideas leapt out. You could use the Internet to do mass mailings, cutting down on postage. You could vote over the Internet, effectively enfranchising millions of people by taking laptops to them. You could post your policy statements online. You could maybe raise money through direct marketing over the Internet. Perhaps policy could be written by The People rather than by the candidate. At the very least, the candidate could listen to what her supporters were suggesting.

Most of these turned out to be bad ideas. Mass mailings are spam. Internet voting is insecure. Policy statements on line are as boring as policy statements on paper. Candidates come into campaigns with a set of beliefs, so they don't want to put them up for informal votes among supporters. And candidates really don't have time to read thousands of emails, even if some of them have great ideas.

Further, most of these ideas are continuations of the old broadcast model of politics in which the central figure beams her "message" to the faceless mass of supporters who, in return, chant, pump signs up and down, and send checks.

Campaigns have in fact become the most relentless of the broadcast marketers. Candidates are trained to do nothing but deliver their message over and over. If the message of the day was "Good paying jobs," then the candidate responds to a question about AIDS in Africa by saying: "Good question. We have to end AIDS in Africa while ensuring that every American has a good paying job." Tony the Tiger was no less predictable and formulaic.

No wonder the largest party in America has become the I Don't Vote Party.

The Dean campaign's initial insight, according to Joe Trippi, the campaign manager who oversaw the development of its remarkable Internet component, was that the Internet would be a great way to raise lots of money in small donations from lots of people. If two million people each gave $100, they would match George W. Bush's anticipated war chest from large donors. That's mass broadcast thinking.

But Trippi had the wisdom and the guts to let the Internet component develop its own role. In the Spring of 2003, the campaign began its own weblog. The handful of contributors signed their own name to everything they wrote, and readers came to know them and like them. Love them, even. That's one important way to get over the problem of mass communication: The CEO may not be able to correspond with each person individually, but there are some people in the organization who can speak in their own voice about what really matters to them. We hear those voices and respond in very personal ways. It's still a broadcast, but at least it's a person and not a marketing strategy that's talking to us. There had never been someone in the role of campaign blogger before – someone who speaks for the candidate but not as a direct representative like a press secretary, someone who speaks in her own voice. Remarkable.

At the same time, the campaign started using MeetUp.com, an online service that enables local groups to meet in the real world. And now the real solution to the mass broadcasting problem started to become clear: We can't all talk with Howard Dean or even with his campaign site's bloggers, but we sure as hell can talk with one another.

That doesn't reverse the flow of the broadcast – many talking to one. It blows apart the model. The many now form groups and talk amongst themselves.

In the months that followed, the Dean campaign tried to make it ever easier for groups to form. The campaign backed the development of open source software for groups that wanted to have virtual meeting places. It offered its own "social network" that encouraged people to find in cyberspace others nearby in real space so that they could organize local events. It even tried "point-to-point" communications by providing supporters with addresses of registered Democrats in states with early primaries so that the "Deaniacs" could write heartfelt letters explaining what they saw in the Doctor.

Blowing apart the broadcast model is no easy thing for a political campaign, for it means giving up at least some measure of control. But isn't the chief lesson of the success of the Internet that control is the enemy of scale? If you want something to grow big fast, you have to let it loose. For the Internet, that means the architecture has no central point of access and requires no permissions to join. For a campaign, it means that the candidate is no longer fully in charge of her or his message. The groups that formed using the Dean campaign Internet tools were free to create their own mission statement. The people writing letters to undecided voters in Iowa and New Hampshire were encouraged to come up with their own drafts. Even the make-your-own-sign facility on the Dean site had a blank where you could fill in your own message.

The result was some chaos around the message. And it meant that conversations among Dean supporters sometimes were about how strongly they disagreed with the candidate on this or that issue. Even so, the enthusiasm of the supporters – even with their variance from the official platform – has become legendary. Deaniacs, indeed.

Yet, all in all, what good did it do? Some have claimed that the architecture of the Dean campaign created "echo chambers" where people only listened to their own voices and shut out the voice of reality. I think that is a misreading of what happened. People did indeed use online Dean spaces to sing the praises of their candidate and his campaign, but these were like any other political gathering of supporters where one feels safe in one's enthusiasm and in which bonds of commitment are formed. If the Dean campaign was ever deluded into thinking it was doing better than it was, the high polling numbers, record crowds, and record-breaking fund raising were far more to blame than Internet enthusiasm could have been.

And others have complained that the Dean campaign didn't use this anti-broadcast infrastructure to bubble policy ideas up from the grassroots. Despite some fairly petty examples – campaign manager Joe Trippi got the idea to have the Governor brandish a symbolic red bat from one of the blog discussion boards – it is true that policy and strategy were set by the campaign management without much grassroots input. But that's inevitable for a political campaign centered on a candidate. The candidate has to come to the campaign with a set of ideas and policies; otherwise, she or he would be nothing but a blank slate, waiting to be inscribed by polling data. The problem with the grassroots writing policy is that it merely tries to reverse the flow of the broadcast, and that doesn't work very well – although it would have been fascinating if the Dean campaign had taken the opportunity to experiment with connecting all the policy conversations, from the candidate, through the campaign policy department, to the grassroots themselves.

Good came from the breaking of the broadcast metaphor. An obscure Vermont governor went from zero to a significant percentage of popular support. A way was discerned to raise money without having to pander to special interests. People felt themselves to be a part of the campaign that mattered. People opened their hearts to politics again, perhaps because politics was spoken not through ads and sound bytes, but through the voices of real people whom they knew or came to know. Democracy once again seemed to be something that we, the people, do, not something that every four years is done to us.

We don't yet know what the effect will be now that we have remembered that democracy is about connecting as much as about standing alone in a voting booth facing a lonely, existential decision. The Dean campaign may turn out to be an awakening of something we can't yet foresee, and if it does, it will be more because of our deep desire to connect – as individual voices paradoxically joined in a mass – than because of any of the stands taken by that particular candidate in that particular year.