

# Comment

## Teledemocracy from the top

Sam Lehman-Wilzig

---

*Teledemocracy, the use of new communications and information technology to widen the scope of the public's political participation, is a hot topic. Over the past few years a number of wide-scale teledemocratic experiments have taken place, for example in New Zealand, the State of Washington, and Hawaii, and the idea is being increasingly discussed in the scholarly as well as popular literature.<sup>1</sup> The reasoning behind, and justification for, teledemocracy has been expounded before.<sup>2</sup> This Comment, however, attacks the problem from a new perspective – where do politicians fit into such a system, and why should they nurture its development?*

---

*Keywords: Information technology; Voting systems; Public policy*

The author is Lecturer in the Department of Political Studies, Bar-Ilan University, 52 100 Ramat Gan, Israel.

<sup>1</sup>Richard M. Neustadt, 'Politics and the new media', in Howard F. Didsbury, Jr, ed, *Communications and the Future*, World Future Society, Bethesda, MA, 1982, pp 248–254; P. Pergler, *The Automated Citizen: Social and Political Impact of Interactive Broadcasting*, Institute for Research on Public Policy, Toronto, 1980. See also Clement Bezold, ed, *Anticipatory Democracy: People in the Politics of the Future*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978, for several analyses of the potential for telecommunications' impact on politics.

<sup>2</sup>See Sam Lehman-Wilzig, 'Demokraty in the mega-polis: hyper-participation in the post-industrial age', paper delivered at the VII World Conference on Futures Studies, *Continued on page 6*

While teledemocracy can be philosophically and politically defended from the perspective of the citizenry, the problem in its successful establishment lies elsewhere – our elected representatives. For until the gatekeepers of our democracy, the politicians, take an interest in teledemocracy there is little chance that it will ever get off the ground in any permanent, institutionalized fashion. The question, therefore, is not 'what's in it for us' (we intuitively know), but rather 'what's in it for the politician'? Once the government is convinced of teledemocracy's utility, that is, once our representatives begin to see that such a 'revolution' is in their own best interests, the problem becomes merely technical and technological – not political. It's always easier to decide 'how' after the question 'whether' has already been resolved.

To relate the problem to our representatives and their interests, we must first come to some understanding as to what a representative is supposed to do. This is not altogether simple but, broadly speaking, one can discern three main approaches to representation: the reflective, the evaluative, and the pedagogic.

*Reflective.* John Stuart Mill considered the chief task of the representatives as being the technical execution of what their constituents want done.<sup>3</sup> In other words, elected officials should merely reflect the wishes of the democratic public at large. For example, should the public express its desire for cutting taxes as a way to stimulate the economy, then the only job left the representative is deciding what, and how much, to cut. The politician is seen here as a mere political extension of the

public's hand – a necessary evil due to the impossibility of conducting direct democracy in a nation (or district) numbering over a few thousand citizens.

*Evaluative.* Edmund Burke, himself a philosopher and elected politician like Mill, felt that given the general paucity of human intelligence and overabundance of human self-interestedness, the representatives should be left alone after the elections to evaluate and decide, on the basis of their own experience and wisdom, what government policy should be. The prime role of the citizen is to determine, on the basis of past experience and present platform, who is the candidate most suited morally and intellectually to help run the country.

*Pedagogic.* The Greek philosopher Plato saw the matter in a still different light. The problem he argued, was at base an educational one. Athenian democracy did not work because there was no general educational system to afford the masses the intellectual wherewithal to rule themselves. Thus, the task of leadership was pedagogic – to morally teach and intellectually train the public; in short, to raise the level of public thought and discourse. Once on the 'right' path, the public of its own volition would desire and take the correct political decisions.<sup>4</sup>

I would suggest that all three are partly valid and reflect in greater or smaller measure the perspective of today's politicians. The task before us is to show how teledemocracy can aid them in the fulfilment of their roles, whatever their conception with regard to representation.

**'Since the potential for abuse is high, supervision must be airtight'**

There are an almost infinite variety of teledemocratic systems possible. My object here is not to enumerate them but rather to find the common benefits which can accrue from the system qua system, regardless of any technical differences among the myriad teledemocracies which may evolve.

The future marriage of new communications technology with the computer is inevitable. If millions vote in an election via their home cable TV set, for example, only a central computer could begin to tabulate and report the results in the short time-frame we have come to expect. But fast tabulation will be the least of its benefits; more importantly, we shall inevitably begin to make use of its powers of storage and retrieval. For tabulation is a function needed once every two or four years; for teledemocracy to be a real improvement on the present system we must move in a direction whereby our quadrennial official vote is put to use throughout the period *between* elections.

In short, I am referring here to a teledemocratic databank. Every vote by every voter would be stored in such a central bank including the name of the voter, address, and other relevant information. Access, of course, would have to be severely restricted by law, with a fully non-partisan, independent body controlling the apparatus and its store of information. Since the potential for abuse is high, such supervision must be as airtight as we can politically, legally, and technologically make it.

How would such a system work? Communication from the politician to the voters would be blind. For example (and I am assuming a society where the home computer or cable TV set is as universally ubiquitous as is today's telephone), a legislative issue comes up for debate and eventual vote, and representative K realizes that it is an issue in which K's supporters have an active interest, or which can have a major impact on their lives. As a result, K puts in a request to the databank to send a questionnaire (which K's staff devises) – and any other relevant information (committee findings, news reports, etc) – to everyone who voted for K. A time limit for responding –

perhaps a week – could be set. The answers flow back to the databank and K is presented with the results.

There are a number of points to be noted here. First, the variation of those groups to be questioned by K are almost endless. For example, K could request from the bank that *all* voters in the district be polled, with a detailed breakdown of supporters and non-supporters, or by age groups, educational level, party affiliation, intensity of feeling on the topic, and so on; in other words, a public opinion poll with a response base far higher than the thousand-odd polled nowadays, and with breakdowns which the representative considers to be of importance.

Second, such communication need not be initiated solely by the elected representative (or a political party in the case of a proportional system of representation). Interest groups (or even individuals) could 'correspond' through the databank with their elected representatives at any time. Here too the official would be informed of the group's collective 'profile'. Indeed, there is no reason why under certain prescribed circumstances part of the public itself could not initiate such polls, perhaps to raise public consciousness (not to mention the representative's) on the issue.

Third, the system could be a boon to the development and strengthening of various voluntary interest groups. For a fee, a group could request an electronic mailing to be sent from the databank to any set of voters – much as mailing lists are purchased today, except that here the specific addressees would not be known to the mailers beforehand. For example, an ecology group could have a mailing sent to all citizens who voted for 'ecology' candidates, thereby soliciting membership and support. Teledemocracy, if it is to really succeed in returning us to our democratic roots, must facilitate horizontal political discourse between citizens, and not just vertical communication between rulers and ruled.

If I have already touched upon the topic of direct democracy, I should add to all the aforementioned the 'mega-forum' system of teledemocracy suggested by Toffler and others.<sup>5</sup>

*Continued from page 5*

<sup>1</sup>The Future of Politics', Stockholm, Sweden, 6–8 June 1982, sponsored by the World Futures Studies Federation.

<sup>2</sup>Parliament, argued Mill, is a 'Congress of Opinions' and a 'Council of Legislation'. The representatives 'are not a selection of the greatest political minds in the country . . . but are, when properly constituted, a fair sample of every grade of intellect among the people. . . Their part is to indicate wants, to be an organ for popular demands. . .' (*Considerations on Representative Government* in J.M. Robson, ed, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol 19, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1977, pp 432–33).

<sup>3</sup>The remaining official in this field is the director of the entire education of the boys and girls . . . by far the most important of all the supreme offices in the state'. (Plato, *The Laws*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, UK, 1970, pp 240–41).

<sup>5</sup>Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, Bantam Books, New York, 1971, pp 480–484; Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, Bantam Books, New York, 1981, p 429; Ted Becker, 'Teledemocracy', *The Futurist*, Vol 15, No 6, December 1981, pp 6–9.

---

## 'A central concern of politicians is getting re-elected'

---

Opinion polls are important; inter-citizen communication is vital; but as Aristotle<sup>6</sup> (and Cicero) noted, it is the give and take of live political debate which stirs the mind and sets man apart as political animals in comparison with the merely social animal kingdom inhabiting the earth.

Again, to take but one possible variation, every Tuesday evening at nine o'clock a Congressional debate could be held on national TV, over a burning issue (or upcoming legislative vote). Notice of the topic could be announced well in advance, allowing each interested citizen to telecommunicatively obtain information before the debate (put out by the parties, and/or the national data bank for objective facts and figures). Of course, the programme need not always be in the form of a debate. In an increasingly visually-oriented society we might have the political parties produce a short film outlining in as interesting a fashion as possible their stand on the specific issue. At the close of the debate/programme, a national vote could be taken (not necessarily legally binding on the representatives). Here too the legislators would get a voter breakdown which is relevant to each of them. We should note that it is the legislature which decides the topic and parameters of the discussion, not the public: teledemocracy is not a call for democratic anarchism.

The crux of the matter revolves around the benefits of such a system to the politician. Why would they want the public sticking its nose into their work? The answer depends on the type of representative one is talking about, so I shall develop my argument according to the three representative typologies outlined earlier.

Our 'reflective' representative is the easiest case to deal with. At present, such a politician has a serious problem for there are few if any tools with which a determination can be made as to what the constituents think or want on any specific issue. Worse yet from such an individual's standpoint is the fact that it is not always known which issues really get the constituents riled up, so that in all innocence the 'reflective' representative can vote on a seemingly unimportant issue, unaware of the

latent hostility or support such a vote may arouse.

Thus, as we saw a few minutes ago, not only the poll initiated by the politicians is of importance to them, but polls and other forms of communication initiated by the public can be of equal benefit and importance to 'reflective' representatives. By allowing the public to both display its interest and express the precise content of such interest, the 'reflective' politicians can do a better job based on their own definition of their functions.

Let us also not pass over another central concern of such politicians – getting re-elected. Almost all research in political science shows that incumbents lose their bid for re-election only when they are significantly out of step with their constituents. Teledemocracy is probably the best system ever devised to ensure that the official will not accidentally stray too far from what the public wants. I am not suggesting here that politicians should never 'move ahead' of their constituents (what is commonly but erroneously called 'statesmanship'; sometimes statesmanship involves not doing something new which the public wants). Rather, teledemocracy of the type I have outlined here removes the uncertainty factor.

The 'evaluative' representative to be sure, is much less interested in the direction of the public tide of opinion, since such an official relies on the powers of self-evaluation in deciding what's best for the country. How, then, can teledemocracy be of aid to anyone holding this second philosophy of representation?

To begin with, an 'evaluative' representative is not omniscient. No one could hope to have a clear opinion on all the issues facing us. Thus, there are many issues on which such a politician will of necessity revert to the first approach as a result of lack of intellectual or informational 'superiority' over the constituents themselves. Similarly, any truly 'evaluative' person must on occasion come up against the Hamlet syndrome – both sides to an issue are partially 'true', 'just', 'arguable', etc – and referring back to the public may make more sense than flipping a coin.

---

## 'Teledemocracy is not a call for democratic anarchism'

---

<sup>6</sup>Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident . . . man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech'. (Aristotle, *Politics*, The Modern Library, New York, 1943, p 54). Cicero concurred: 'It is reason and speech that unite men to one another; there is nothing else in which we differ so entirely from the brute creation'. (*De Officiis*, I).

More important, however, is the need to determine where precisely lies the 'superiority' of our 'evaluative representative'. The answer is, of course, in objective knowledge. Thus if the country is in an economic mess our representatives (theoretically) have a better technical understanding of how to get out of it. However, as Daniel Bell pointed out a decade ago, politics in the post-industrial age is moving from an economic mode to a sociological mode.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the options which lie before us are not grounded in objective technique or facts, but rather are based on subjective values.

The problem is not simply how we should develop a strong economy, but rather whether there are other, competing values which may temper this monolithic quest, eg a cleaner environment, more leisure time, social justice or job satisfaction. Before the representatives can bring their powers to bear on the precise policy to be developed for a strong economy, they must first know what the ultimate goals of society are. On questions of metaphysics there is no intrinsic superiority of elected representatives or anyone else. The moral weight of each citizen is equal, and even the 'evaluative' representative must first understand the value-goals of society before embarking on 'independent' decision making. It was Burke himself who talked of 'social wisdom', of the moral qualities of each civilization leading it in its own unique direction. Teledemocracy is a powerful means of enabling such 'social wisdom' to express itself on a general metaphysical plane, while retaining the ultimate 'technical' and 'objective' decisions in the hands of those most able to make them - our 'evaluative' representatives.

The 'pedagogic' representative, our third type, will also be immeasurably helped by various aspects of teledemocracy. The 'mega-polis' is a powerful tool in teaching the public the problems of the day. It could become the future equivalent of Roosevelt's national radio fireside chats. In the current welter of channels of communication and information overload which already threatens to fracture public opinion into a hyperdiversity which no

society can long afford, such a teledemocratic medium would restore some much needed focus to public political discourse. In addition, the literature which can be sent via the central databank is another instrument in raising the level of public political thought and discussion.

Teledemocracy can offer the politician direct access without society having to fear demagogic brainwashing as a result of a lack of competing messages. Indeed, one could even go so far as to suggest that every time representative or party K sends a message or requests a poll to be taken, the national databank could be required to send 'competing' literature to that same public and/or report the results of the poll to K's political opponents. After all, the whole idea underlying teledemocracy is to strengthen the democratic system, not to bring about its replacement.

As the educational level and political consciousness of the public has risen dramatically during the past generation, more and more demands on an increasingly wider array of issues have been addressed to the political system. But our democracies were not built to handle such input loads, and the political channels of communication have either become blocked or the politicians have tuned them out due to the disharmonious cacophony streaming in from the public. As a result, we are witnesses these last three decades to a phenomenon which signifies the ossification of our democratic system - extra-parliamentary behaviour: mass street demonstrations, public sit-ins, marches on capital cities, public initiated referenda and constitutional amendments, riots, etc.

Teledemocracy holds out the brightest promise for regularizing, routinizing, and institutionally channeling the public's natural and positive political instincts in a way which will ensure that democracy continues as a viable enterprise. And that, in the final analysis, is the greatest benefit which teledemocracy can bestow on the people as well as their elected political representatives. Otherwise, the latter will not only be out of a job - they'll be out of a profession too.

---

**'The whole idea underlying teledemocracy is to strengthen the democratic system, not to bring about its replacement'**

---

<sup>7</sup>Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Basic Books, New York, 1973, Chap 4.