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The Weak Signal of Mobile Governance



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We live in a time of great historical disruption and transition from the Industrial Age to what some are calling the Connected Age, where a new language will be needed to identify ideas and methods that are not a part of present reality. No longer will traditional thinking and action be able to adapt to a society and economy that is constantly changing, interconnected, and increasingly complex.

Nowhere will this need to anticipate a different type of future be more important than in the area of governance for a democracy. It is our contention that we are reaching the upper limits of representative democracy that is based on checks and balances. This suggests the need for a dialogue about a new concept of democracy that utilizes the emerging connective technologies that will allow citizens to provide their existing knowledge and opinions and enter into decision making from any place at any time. At the same time, growing groups of citizens capable of identifying weak signals and emerging ideas, conversant with new knowledge, and able to use emerging mobile technologies will be required for the next phase of democracy to be successful.

The representative system of democracy in the U.S. was originally established on certain assumptions. One was that those who were the most talented would be elected and not those who had the most wealth. A second was that virtue would be at the core of those who were elected. A third was that wisdom in the sovereignty of the people would provide the common sense needed for effective decision making for democracies. A fourth was that checks and balances would prevent power from residing in only one branch of government.

Over the years, this traditional approach has served well until recently. With the advent of technologies that connect people and growing challenges in real time from throughout the world, the interlocking

complexity of issues has reached a point where the knowledge of experts is not enough, and, at times, counterproductive. This is especially true when any emerging challenge requires new knowledge based on what is in the process of developing and not on what has occurred in the past.

As a result, it is our opinion that we are on the brink of a true transformation in democratic governance that will exploit the potential of new technologies when combined with new capacities of leaders able to facilitate new processes that can access the opinions and ideas of a broad, diverse, knowledgeable, and interested pool of citizens. What will begin to dawn on people is that there are no experts in a time when the very undergirding ideas and methods that made traditional society effective are no longer valid. We are in a time of such historical transformation that we will need the interest, involvement, and knowledge of many people working in collaboration to deal with the congruence of major challenges such as climate change, peak oil and shift of energy systems, biodiversity loss, population growth, and the interaction and impacts of multiple new technologies. We are entering an age of societal research and development that has historical implications...none less so than rethinking how democracy may evolve and be aligned with the needs of a new type of society that is more distributive and organized around interlocking networks.

With this in mind, there is a weak signal that is beginning to appear in various areas of the country. It is becoming more and more obvious that many local leaders are not familiar with trends and weak signals, and as a result, are not able to ask appropriate questions and help facilitate effective strategies for emerging issues. A new process beginning to emerge that may become more and more important....a process that we have dubbed "mobile connecting" that links those interested locally (especially non-leaders) in a search for key people anywhere in the world to bring new ideas and weak signals to the attention of existing key local groups responsible for making decisions for the present and the future. With the advent of smart phones and GPS systems, we are entering a new age that will reshape how our society operates and that will allow citizens to have the flexibility to connect their needs to the common good. In fact, in an interconnected, systemic age, self-interest and common good become one.

This will become more and more important in our opinion, perhaps eventually leading to a new concept, "mobile governance," where elected officials and staff members, especially of medium size and smaller communities, begin to realize that they are not able to keep up with new ideas and methods. These leaders will develop new "knowledge connection" processes that will utilize the community members (especially the "millennials" under 32) to find cutting edge ideas and send them to their existing organizations as well as build new local and regional interlocking networks as appropriate. This will be one of the most important outcomes of this type of process....leading eventually to a shift of the norm from radical individualism and turfdom so rampant in our society, to levels of deeper collaboration.

Ultimately, a transformational governance and decision making structure may emerge as the result of mobile technologies in which as many people in the community as are interested are involved in research, development, and collaboration on ideas and projects. The weak signal of this emerging systemic change is seen in the way President Obama and his staff are utilizing the Internet for multiple purposes of citizen involvement. These purposes will be as diverse as searching for new knowledge, identifying key issues and emerging ideas, developing collaborative strategies, and participating in real time decision making for those who want to be involved. There may even be a new connection between governance and economic development in the way revenue streams are created for local people who identify emerging ideas and methods that are adopted by the community.

What is being realized by more and more people is that in this age of emerging systems, creating dynamic connections among people, new ideas, and networks will be the lubricant and the glue to insure vibrant and sustainable democracies in a different kind of future. The age of representative democracy will slowly fade into the dimming glow of Industrial Society. It has served well, but is too limited and too slow to anticipate and adapt to constantly changing conditions. What is emerging from the mist of the future is

unknown at this time, but iPhones, smart mobile technologies, cloud computing, and a different kind of leader able to facilitate connections and ask appropriate questions, will be key factors in the emerging next phase of democracy.

***Rick Smyre** is an internationally recognized futurist specializing in the area of building "capacities for transformation" in local communities. A graduate of Davidson College and NC State University, he is President of the Center for Communities of the Future and is an architect of the new field of "community transformation." Mr. Smyre is the past Chairman of the Board of the American Association of Retirement Communities and was on the staff of the National Economic Development Institute for fourteen years. In the '70s he was the CEO of a textile yarn spinning firm. Mr. Smyre's work emphasizes innovative transformational concepts, methods, and techniques connected with preparing local communities for a constantly changing future. He speaks internationally and has provided more than 400 seminars, keynotes, and retreats over the last two decades to introduce these "Community Transformation" and "Second Enlightenment" ideas. This year will be the sixteenth year he has presented at the international World Future Society Conference.*

***Norma Owen** is President of Avadon, LLC located in Dallas, TX. Having worked at both the national and local level, helping individuals, businesses, and entire communities, Norma's most recent efforts have focused on creating and implementing innovative programs and policies that help entire regions transform their workforce readiness to a 21st Century model. As a dedicated futurist, business infrastructure and planning specialist, and workforce development specialist, Norma created a career resiliency program that helped more than 3,000 out-of-work professionals prepare for survival and success in today's volatile business climate in Raleigh, NC. She is a past member of the North Carolina Capital Area Workforce Development Board, former team leader for the Raleigh 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, and Community Relations Chair for the National Association of Women Business Owners. She will present the Future Forward Workforce idea at the World Future Society Conference in Boston in July.*

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *As Smyre and Owen indicate, new technologies can take democracy to the next level by enabling direct citizen participation. An earlier article by Youngsook Park (Summer-Fall 2006 issue, p. 1) discusses how in South Korea, IT has rendered political parties less relevant. Given the proliferation of information, to what extent can a person ensure that his/her voice is heard? Also, to what extent will information overload impact decision making in governance?*
- *Will mobile governance be more responsive to people than representative democracy is, or will it be more alienating, and why?*
- *Under mobile governance, will debate and discussion be more substantive than they are under representative democracy, or will sound bite politics intensify, and why?*
- *In what ways will mobile governance impact social change and its mechanisms, including tipping points?*
- *Will mobile governance democracies be more functional than representative democracies? Will they be more faddish and poll-sensitive, or if not, what new checks and balances may emerge?*

- *Do you agree with Smyre and Owen that “in an interconnected, systemic age, self-interest and common good become one”? Why or why not? Compare with Adam Smith’s writings on economics.*
- *Will democracies based on mobile governance be effective in addressing long-term issues – more effective than forward-looking but non-democratic governments? Also, are there countervailing trends against the march of democracy?*
- *Also see the comments in governance in the synopsis of Don Topscott’s keynote address at World Future 2009, synopsised by Jay Herson in this issue, and the discussion points in articles from various back issues: “South Korea: Leader in e-Democracy” by Youngsook Park, Summer-Fall 2006 issue, p. 1; “The Future of Leadership,” synopsis of luncheon program by Herb Rubenstein, Winter 2005-2006 issue, p. 10; “Is a New Constitution in our U.S. Future?” synopsis of dinner program by Joe Coates, Joe Coates Consulting Futurist, Inc., Spring 2005 issue, p. 11; “Downsizing Democracy – How America Sidelined its Citizens and Privatized its Public,” synopsis of luncheon program by Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, Spring 2005 issue, p. 13; and “Local Governance and Global Citizenship,” by Riccardo Cinquegrani, Spring-Summer 2009 issue.*