

Many who are concerned about the deterioration of American (and Jewish) public life hope that the Internet will significantly enhance the quality of our civic life by creating a commons where citizens can come together to discuss, and deliberate upon, issues of the day. Others have been more skeptical, believing that the Internet -- whatever its inherent promise might have been -- has already been colonized by the same market forces that have had such a deleterious effect on our public square more generally. Libby Garland reports on a conference that was recently convened to assess the Internet's performance to date and its future prospects as a democratic civic medium. Might the Internet contribute to the salvation of our Jewish and American public life?

The Future of the Cyber-Commons: To What End? In Whose Interest?

By Libby Garland

'I'd like to think forward to Election 2004,' said the Executive Director of a [network of community-based centers providing internet access](#). She paused, looking over the podium at the hotel banquet room filled with the community organizers, think tankers, techies, and academics who gathered last weekend in Washington, D.C. for the National Civic League's conference, '[Wired for Civic Engagement: Using Technology to Build Community](#).' 'Assuming,' she added dryly, 'we ever finish Election 2000.'

The context of the bizarrely dangling presidential election made it a strange, strange weekend indeed to be in the nation's capital (or rather in Crystal City, Virginia, the odd area between Ronald Reagan National Airport and the Pentagon that feels more virtual than real) discussing technology's potential to build democracy and foster civic engagement. The efficacy of democracy and civic engagement seemed even more elusive than usual; as for technology, well, it was a rude jolt to see our high-tech society, apparently incapable of designing a reliable voting machine, reduced to counting votes by hand as if this were a junior high school student council election. ('Some people are saying that on-line voting is the answer,' scoffed a Saturday Night Live 'newscaster' last weekend. 'On-line voting? My grandmother's scared of her answering machine. You think she's going to vote on the Internet?') Meanwhile, the all-knowing, high-speed media seemed as deflated as last spring's NASDAQ by the realization that the information age was not quite as much their oyster as they'd thought.

At one level, the apparent implosion of the democratic process seemed to confirm James Fallows' contention, in a recent [New York Review of Books article](#) cited by one conference panelist, that this election revealed the Internet to have far less democratizing promise than some had predicted. It hadn't created a broadly knowledgeable electorate whose access to information neutralized traditional media's influence in politics or whose savvy reduced the importance of

money by making politicians primarily answerable to 'the public's enlightened will.' Despite creative on-line voter registration initiatives, popular Web-based videos advocating environmentally conscious voting, lively election chat rooms and Nader Trading (efforts conference participants had worked on or tracked), the Net hadn't transformed party politics. If anything, this fizzling election seemed the logical outcome of a system driven by issue-empty image building paid for by big money.

Yet, at another level, the outcomeless election was vindicating for this group. The explosion of debate the Florida recount sparked among radio talk show callers and Internet chatters contradicted common wisdom about the national scourge of political apathy. The sudden realization that the votes and laws of particular municipalities and counties still matter a great deal pointed to the ongoing relevance, and quirkiness, of local communities in an era we think of as characterized by national and global homogenizing.

And perhaps most significantly for this predominantly non-profit crowd, the surprising unpredictability'who expected to stay up until the wee hours of Wednesday morning and still not know the results?'meant that even in this era of focus groups and exit polls as fine-tuned and high-tech as Wal-Mart's inventory tracking, we still can't know how everything will turn out. The market model of politics is not as seamless, as monolithic, as it likes to think'there is still room in the political process for towns, for people, for error, for confusion, for debate.

Which is true, the gathering ultimately insisted, of the Internet as well: there is still room on the Internet. Unlike most mass media, the Internet has room for interactions not shaped entirely by market forces. And because the Internet is still in the process of becoming (the year 2000, suggested Bill Galston, Director of the University of Maryland's [Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy](#), is to the Internet's timeline what 1952 was to television's), it is still open to debate. It still has room for those who opt to participate in its very creation.

No one at the National Civic League's conference was denying that the market has a tight grip on both politics and new media. But if there was one central question underlying the conference, it was this: how can people and institutions interested in all those things the non-profit world tends to be interested in'equitable access to education and health care, increased opportunities for underserved communities, politically empowering the disempowered'claim, occupy, preserve, and expand the public room that exists on the Internet in order to claim, occupy, preserve, and expand the public room that still exists in the political realm, and vice versa? Some used the environmental language of 'preserving green space' on the Internet, while others invoked political theorist Juergen Habermas' notion of a debate-filled 'public sphere' to describe their vision of democratic Internet forums. But what was striking was how spatial the metaphors were. This was a conference about staking out territory, making and taking room where civic space and cyberspace converge.

Space to do what, exactly? The conference title suggested that the idea was to build collective community'global, national, regional'in meaningful, sustainable ways. Communities rather than markets; on this, conference participants could agree. But this left everyone to grapple with what, in fact, defined 'community' at all in this wired age.

Is a virtual 'placeless' community a real community in the same way a virtual, but 'place-based' one is? Can a real, place-based virtual community like [Seattle's progressive online Community Network](#) not only foster a stronger culture of local activism, but also help create the transnational coalitions that surprised the World Trade Organization in Seattle last year? What about quasi-public, corporate-owned 'place-based' on-line communities like the much-touted [Blacksburg, Virginia Electronic Village](#) funded by Bell Atlantic, which emphasizes apolitical (and fictional) homogeneity, in stark contrast to Seattle's kaleidoscopically diverse, politically oriented site? Are these real communities? Are they the more probable model of what cyber-civic space will look like, given the ways that real communities have increasingly chosen to privatize public spaces such as parks, and public services such as education (or even entire towns such as Disney's [Celebration](#))?

Or was this public-private hybrid not such a bad thing? Was the group's suspicion of market forces itself an outdated sensibility and, perhaps, a hindrance in efforts to speak to a generation steeped in the aesthetics and logic of an intensely consumer culture? Would a special 'dot.civ' domain on the Internet, for instance, simply recreate a kind of embattled 'public television/public radio' medium, ghettoizing the 'civic' part of cyberspace? Several people cited a recent study that found that younger Internet users, urged by a Web site to participate in some civic action (such as signing an e-mail petition), were more likely to take action on a site with banner ads than on a site without them. It's not that Generation X and Y want to look at ads all the time; it's that they know who's driving the bus'ads mean money, authority, hipness, and savvy.

To make things more complicated, the weekend's debates over the definition, needs, and goals of 'community' pointed as much to the disagreements and differences in perspective among attendees as to their common goals. The National Civic League itself, for instance, founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt and Louis Brandeis (as the League's President Christopher Gates reminded the audience in his welcoming remarks), reflects a progressive era ethos of reform and civic association whose modern analog has found a powerful new proponent in the person of Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam.

Putnam's exhaustive study of Americans' declining inclination to join and do, [Bowling Alone](#), was much quoted at the conference. But although everyone at the conference may have accepted Putnam's argument about the importance of creating networks that sustain social capital, they didn't all envision civic participation in the same way. While some of the conference participants

represented older institutions (for instance, the public library system, another product of the late 19th century), others represented newer kinds of institutions with different strategies, born not of the transition to an industrial age, but rather of the shift from an industrial age to an information age. For example, e-advocacy campaigns get college students to participate in politics from the privacy of their dorm rooms.

And although Roosevelt and Brandeis hoped civic association could be the glue of a united citizenry, the conference's final day, which focused on the 'digital divide,' highlighted the depth of societal divisions with which any serious discussion of 'civic engagement' and 'community' must contend. For instance, can communications technology really be a serious tool in the redistribution not only of social capital, but also of economic capital, or will it merely re-inscribe and deepen existing inequities?

Beyond basic questions of access to technology at all, the issue of inequities raises the question 'as one panelist put it succinctly' about who designs what, and for whom? Who can be engaged on line, and in what context? What about people with disabilities, who have had to go to court to argue that new technology needs to be ADA compliant? What about people who don't speak or read English, the Internet's predominant language by far? What about people for whom the Internet's content, when they can access it at all, is largely irrelevant to the most pressing questions of underserved neighborhoods' local schools, safety, housing, health, jobs? What about women who as a group are avid Internet users, but yet rarely hold jobs as the high-earning techies behind the scenes?

Of course, it was not lost on this group that everyone had come to the conference for the kind of networking that can only happen off line, face-to-face: chance conversations around the dinner table, the exchange of business cards, the sense of human engagement. There is something curious about trying to pin down the meaning of a wired world when we still really have barely become one and when we know we probably never entirely will. The suspended election, still hovering over the nation as the conference disbanded, seemed, in the end, an apt backdrop: a parable of incomplete transition, unknown outcome, and the power of the unexpected to shape the national debate and the future of politics.

More interesting Web sites associated with conference participants, or discussed at the conference, follow:

[Athena Alliance](#)
[California Voter Foundation](#)
[Center for Democracy and Technology](#)
[Center for Environmental Citizenship](#)
[Center for Media Education](#)
[Center for Women and Information Technology](#)
[Democracy Online Newswire](#)

[Democracy Online Project](#)

[E-advocates](#)

[Election.com](#)

[Howard Rheingold](#)

[National Coalition on Black Civic Participation](#)

[Resource Center for Cyberculture Studies](#)

[The PBS Democracy Project 2000](#)

[Virtual Town Hall](#)

