E-Democracy.org

Participation 3.0

Draft 1.3 - July 30, 2009 - By Steven Clift, Founder and Executive Director, E-Democracy.org and Ashoka Fellow, http://stevenclift.com

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E-Democracy.org currently hosts 25 real name-based, civil and agenda-setting online "Issues Forums" across 15 communities in three countries. Based in Minnesota since 1994, recent expansion at the neighborhood level, including grant-funded efforts in low income/ high immigrant areas as well as rural communities, is opening up new opportunities for innovation and a depth of unparalleled daily local online civic engagement.

This discussion draft outlines the amazing things we could do with comprehensive online civic engagement pilot by extending our 10% household participation level in our largest neighborhood forum across the central cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul (and then beyond)to an equivalent 30,000 daily participants. See the related overview slides document for illustrations providing a quick overview.

See the "More" links at the bottom of this draft to recent blog posts that bring the story of alive. This draft builds on the world's most experienced online civic engagement project and many of the best e-democracy ideas gathered from around the world through Steven Clift's speaking visits to over 25 countries as well as those highlighted via his Democracies Online - DoWire.Org network with members from 100+ nations. It is time for what's next.

Imagine: Unparalleled local online civic engagement and participation.

Imagine the world's best and most comprehensive local online network for effective civic engagement where you can:
- Get to know and connect with your neighbors to keep your block safe and provide mutual support
- Learn about community issues, trends, and developments and lend your voice, experience, and knowledge
- Use online tools to solve problems and effectively share your time to meet public challenges
- Inclusively engage a great diversity of people, viewpoints, and interests
- Connect with your elected officials and democratic processes "anytime, anywhere" in new and innovative ways
- Reach out to a deeply interactive citizenry from government, the media, and community organizations via cost-effective social media
- Generate models, lessons, and technology for local communities and democracies around the nation

Goal: Next generation online citizen engagement and participation pilot.

Generate in-depth critical mass online local civic participation and engagement using innovative approaches taking us five years ahead of where we are today. Create knowledge and share lessons widely. Develop cutting edge technology, strategies, and sustainable business models involving e-democracy experts around the world for eventual spread to many more communities.

Participate in: Local public life.

Participation and engagement in public life with their neighbors, the broader community, diverse communities (not just the "usual suspects"), government, local non-profits, and the local media. This includes community agenda-setting, sharing of local information and news, diversity of voices, input into government decision-making, and community problem-solving with direct citizen action and voluntarism.

Features: Many. Uniquely allow people to choose their technology - e-mail, web, blog feeds, Facebook, iPhone, etc. - and be part of the same virtual exchange.

Develop core features and tools while leveraging open source and/or free-to-use commercial social media tools where possible. Technology choice (including e-mail publishing) is why our Issues Forums double or even triple the typical percentage of user-generated contributions to so-called Web 2.0 sites. We will build on that success and avoid throwing out the good for the new blindly. It is important to emphasize our "build a critical mass participant approach" is open to using and leveraging online content and services provided by others.

Possible core **Phase One** features:

1. **Social networking style registration built from geographic location** - Each participant will have a "public life" profile page and tools they can use to encourage others to join them (people will be able to participate directly online or connect via interfaces like Facebook or their iPhone). Based on personal distance preferences people will choose to be displayed in a private Neighbors Directory accessible to their verified neighbors (~automatic "Friends" in social networking speak, but people technology will help you get to know).

2. **Electronic block clubs** - Actively support private group communication among those who live very near one another - key features will support the ability of a block captain or motivated person to organize their block online and use this tool to solve the number one challenge of block leaders: communication   This and item 3 below will be the initial engine for public interest and participation.

3. **Neighbor forums and exchange** - These public online spaces support a broad range of hyper-local exchange building on E-Democracy.Org's 15 years of Issues Forum experience - from discussions of local public issues to community problem-solving and neighborly advice on local service providers, this is the first level of "public" or visible to all exchange. In terms of revenue generation, sponsorship and online advertising options may have the greatest potential at this level based on current experience.

4. **Community-wide Issues Forums, Multiple languages** - The classic E-Democracy.Org online townhall enhanced with social media approaches and citizen journalism/media. Options for regional/state-wide Hmong, Somali, and Spanish-language (e.g. Minnesota Somali Civic Forum) Issues Forum are being discussed with potential partners to create a place for local and state public issues discussions that complement efforts for inclusive outreach to those constituencies for neighbor forums in diverse areas as well.

5. **Community solutions tool** - The ability to "do something" using integrated tools for small groups to take a discussion and get organized to act. The key approach to promote is direct public service and voluntarism, rather than typical NIMBY e-advocacy which is well supported across the Internet. These tools will be useful in both the civic "input" and collaborative "output" use among stakeholders working to jointly address a public challenge (e.g. affordable housing, greening the neighborhood, graffiti removal, etc.).

6. **Community survey and consultation platform** - An innovative "open sourcing" of online surveys weighted for greater representative value based on broad participation and securely held demographic information volunteered by survey participants (building on the successful Issy, France online citizen panel model). Government and community organizations will be able to field surveys in a cost-effective manner. The public themselves will have the opportunity nominate and vet questions for public surveys with access to thousands of respondents. In addition to the survey tool, the technology used for "Issues Forums" will be adapted to encourage organizationally sponsored and structure online consultation sessions on key issues, draft reports, yearly "town hall" special events, etc.

Phase Two - Additional opportunities with additional budget resources/time:

1. **Who Represents Me Look-up and How to Get Involved Wiki Guide** - A layer of objective citizen-centric advice on how to effectively participate. This will include a dynamic directory of **all** elected officials (at all levels who represent the focus area) and appointed members of area local government committees, commissions, and task forces, etc. that helps the public effectively participate. Despite all of the web sites providing details on state legislators on up, we are aware of no such site that covers the smaller local offices in an integrated manner.

2. **Community task force engagement system** - A toolkit for "transparent" use by government and other community task forces that provide deep public access to all documents, links to webcasts (or support for basic audio webcasts live and on-demand using "Democaster 2.0" tool)

3. **Elected/appointed community leader profiles with e-news and input options** - While all elected and appointed officials will be recruited to participate in the system initially, in this phase tools the help them "lead" and "listen" will be integrated into the platform.

4. **Community meeting notices, agendas, and webcasts directory** - A system that leverages government meeting calendars and integrates neighborhood associations and others into a comprehensive public meetings awareness and participation tool. The system will provide e-notification options for tracking public meetings and agenda items. In addition to on-demand webcast links, low cost audio webcasting leveraging incumbent conference room teleconferencing equipment will be explored to make it economically feasible to webcast/digitally record any or every public meeting

(particularly those that don't justify the cost of video staffing).

5. **Community Views Dashboard** - A special online aggregator tool/collection specifically designed to held elected officials and community leaders follow "feeds" from across the local "Web 2.0" environment so they can better understand the pulse of the community being expressed publicly across the Internet.

Where: Minnesota first, then beyond.

Focus next generation activities within Minneapolis and St. Paul as well as leading rural communities in the E-Democracy.Org Issues Forum network including the Native American majority population area of Cass Lake Leech Lake. Efforts in low income, high immigrant, diverse neighborhoods will be central to the initiative.

Approach: "Local everywhere" with deep and sustainable use demonstrated.

Use "local everywhere" technology and open standards for scalability. Leverage individualized social media private life experiences into **public life** via online engagement. Demonstrate in Minnesota, but design for national extendability. Key focus on volunteer role development for sustainability along with local revenue research and development to cover minimal per participant costs over the long-term.

Strategy: Electronic block clubs and neighborhood forums/exchange as the engine.

Enhance and leverage the more or less private, but common interest networking of neighbors (safety, back fence exchange) with broader rings of public life engagement and community problem-solving online. Attract people based on their core interests and needs, then provide opportunities for enhanced community-wide engagement. Key is to reach critical mass of participants. Nationally, if 10% of neighborhoods have local forums and perhaps 1% of blocks have private e-lists/cc: e-mail patterns currently (no one has measured this), this effort will discover the approaches and technology required to cover 75% of neighborhoods across Minneapolis and St. Paul with at least 50% of registered participants connected in an electronic block club with households near them.

Who: More people than ever before as a percentage engaged civically between elections. At least 30,000 people - with great diversity - across the core Twin Cities engaged online everyday.

Engage the highest percentage of local people/households who "participate" locally online on a sustained regular basis anywhere in the world. By combining "local everywhere" (where someone registers their exact location and chooses who and how to interact online with their neighbors based on distance fom their home more or less "organically") with "declared" bounded online public spaces based on neighborhood boundaries or community-wide topics of interest, you can engage 10% or more of households everyday in local community life online. That will be 30,000 registered users (assuming 1 participant per household, that 10% of households) across Minneapolis and St. Paul. Example forum with close to 10% of its 4,000 households currently participating: http://e-democracy.org/se

Outreach: Aggressive, active, and in-person community organizing in the areas of greatest need.

Build on E-Democracy.Org's practical and pragmatic experience with in-person outreach (paper sign up forms for local online projects work) and provide the essential additional outreach required to engage diverse, low income, and high immigrant population neighborhoods and communities. This approach is working in the heavily East African Cedar Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis and being deployed in the heavily Southeast Asian and African-American Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul. Our "local everywhere" technology approach will allow areas with existing strong social capital to easily extend participation to local areas across the country. However, the key public interest deliverable is design of a system and outreach approach that brings in those neighborhoods of greatest need that are being left behind in the the use of social media in local communities. Launching forums with special in-person deliberative conversations will be considered.

Partners: Many, particularly government and interested local media.

Officially partner with city government, neighborhood associations, grass roots community and cultural organizations, interested local media and others in Minneapolis and St. Paul to take the participation platform to the whole community. The electronic block club system needs to be well promoted as an element of crime prevention while open for many civic uses. Initial meetings with the City of Minneapolis have taken place and our connections in St. Paul city government are strong. Adjusting government internal approaches and resources or update laws may be required to take advantage of Participation 3.0. A broad national/global advisory committee, engaging the some of the best e-democracy/social media/online news experts would aide eventual spread of the model. The target communities themselves will be consulted to help shape deployment and priorities. Working with the public to articulate a vision and express a demand for e-engagement is essential.

Future Technology: Leverage base, open specification and competition for national expansion.

By building the initial Participation 3.0 prototype on the existing open source GroupServer technology base (which is the only open source tool that allows essential "equitable" e-mail participation at its core while integrating advancing social networking features), core features 1 through 5 can be developed in a rapid and relatively cost-effective manner. However, by engaging e-democracy experts around the world, we can craft an open specification. By funding the detailed specification/ software requirements process we can then provide a competitive opportunity to adopt state-of-the-art technology (which could still be GroupServer, but might be something else) before a rolling out as a national "local everywhere" service. We prefer open source technology and would like to see our "modules" developed for use with multiple content management systems.

Revenue: Required for expansion and sustainablity beyond expansion funding.

E-Democracy.Org will test a mix of participant donations, online sponsorship and adverstising, government/partner service fees (particularly related to e-block clubs,

engagement in government), media syndication revenue sharing, and other methods to generate at least $10 in revenue per participant per year. Our volunteer centric approach and use of low cost open source technology covers 90% of the current "cost" to run our network on an ongoing basis. An infusion of capitol to deepen the experience must be combined with an acute attention on the revenue model such that one can estimate the ongoing income generated through expansion. It is our experience that outreach in low income/diverse communities requires a significant up front investment (5x the cost of ongoing hosting and support). The social equity aspects will require dedicated resources from foundations (including community foundations supporting specific inclusion efforts in their area), major donors, and potentially government.

Expansion: Local everywhere without "virtual ghost towns."

The crux of this in-depth research and development pilot is to determine the proper level of ongoing staff and technology support required to provide real value to local communities on a sustained basis. Most "local everywhere" sites provide zipcode-based coverage with low quality anonymous diatribe at its best or simply aggregate local static content with little interactivity. Our question to explore is how E-Democracy.org can open up our local start up process to support more communities and help motivated individuals connect their neighbors **without** requiring full start-up committees and a certain number of initial participants before exchange is opened. While our model "works," its spread will likely become more organic and rapid if we infuse our democratic ideals and quality civic experiences into self-start technology that integrates outreach tools and allows neighborly exchange well before our current 100 members per neighborhood Issues Forum requirement.

More:

The E-Democracy.org Issues Forum model is well documented in informative blog posts, videos, in-depth webinars, guidebooks and more from: http://e-democracy.org/if

Select blog posts include:

- Cass Lake Leech Lake - Issues Forum experience in a majority Native American community: http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/189
- Outreach in Cedar Riverside - In-person outreach to East African and other low income communities: http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/172
- Government Holds "Public Input Session" on Neighborhood Forum: http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/224
- Crime Spurs Community Voice and Government Response: http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/355
- E-Democracy.org helps host Minnesota Voices "Unconference" and shares highlights: http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/265
- E-Democracy.Org featured in Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement's "Funding and Fostering Local Democracy" guide: http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/280