

Electronic Town Meetings:
An Idea Whose Time Has
Come?

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Electronic Town Meetings: An Idea Whose Time has Come?

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Electronic Town Meetings: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

This working paper sets out various scenarios for holding the electronic equivalent of a traditional "town meeting." We turn to the model of the town meeting in search of ways to galvanize citizens back into the habits of participation, deliberation and reasoned judgment upon which democracy ultimately depends.

The idea of an electronic town meeting came into vogue during the 1992 presidential campaign. Ross Perot promised an "electronic town hall," touting the ability of a modern President to let the people decide government policy directly via instant computerized voting from the home. This image of a new-age town hall apparently spoke to millions of Americans frustrated with politics as usual. It provided a banner under which a new movement for citizen empowerment could march. The networks and talk show hosts heard the rallying cry, and quickly adopted the "town meeting" title to describe an assortment of call-in type shows where viewers replaced reporters in questioning Presidential candidates.

But for all the hoopla about electronic town meetings during the campaign, the concept remained remarkably fuzzy and fleshless. What power would the meeting have? Who would choose the sites and set the agenda? Are all issues appropriate, even those of war and peace? How could special interests be prevented from packing the meeting? Questions such as these -- basic to providing a democratic design for the meeting -- were rarely addressed.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the democratic premises and promises of an "electronic town meeting" and to propose designs that might safeguard such a meeting from misuse and manipulation. We hope to put our designs for democratic renewal into practice in 1993, in an initial round of exercises throughout the nation.

I. Democratic Goals of the Face-to-Face Town Meeting

The town meeting has been "an inspirational symbol of American democracy since before the Revolution." In its traditional, face-to-face format, the town meeting aspired to accomplish three great democratic goals: (1) to educate citizens about their common interests; (2) to empower citizens to govern themselves; and (3) to equalize citizens in a process open and accessible to all. Of course, real town meetings constantly fell short of these educating, empowering, and equalizing ideals. The earliest meetings restricted participation on the basis of race, gender, church membership, and property. And even after lifting these restrictions, New England town meetings rarely attracted more than 60 percent of town residents. Moreover, far from being a model of reasoned debate, "every private grudge, every suggestion of petulance and ignorance . . . [was] faithfully produced," noted Ralph Waldo Emerson about his own town meeting in 1833.

But, for all its shortcomings, the town meeting did make democracy a participatory rather than a spectator enterprise. And, at its best, participation in public debate forged the

"bonds of empathy" that motivate people to seek consensus, agreement and common ground.

A brief review of the successes as well as the failures of the traditional town meeting will provide background for our discussion of how best to design an "electronic" town meeting.

(a) The Town Meeting as a Forum for Civic Education

Visiting the United States in the 1830s, the great French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the hands-on education in democracy that town meetings gave so many Americans. He described how participation in public debate rubbed off "the rust of selfishness" and taught Americans to think of themselves as citizens jointly responsible for the common good. And he concluded that town meetings "are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it."

Why was the face-to-face assembly an ideal forum for the education of citizens? Partly, the civic education took place through the prompting and preparation for the meeting -- the mailing of the town report to all residents; the public "warning" of the agenda. But the crucial education, according to Tocqueville, occurred at the meeting itself. To attend was to participate in a potentially transforming process of open debate that was different in kind from the more isolated way individuals participate in voting and elections. Town meeting members might eventually vote; they might agree to disagree and settle their differences only by outvoting one another. But first the members

deliberated; they stood up, in the presence of their neighbors, and exchanged claims about the town's best interests. Such a process of public debate weakened arguments made in terms of naked self interest. Persuasive arguments identified a common good capable of resonating across factional lines. In short, the deliberation empowered citizens who respected the different views of their neighbors and who sought to resolve those differences through consensus rather than conflict.

Ideally, three conditions need to be met for deliberation to do its work of getting people to listen and learn from one another. The face-to-face town meeting houses all three conditions:

First, political messages of substance can be exchanged at length. Citizens are not reduced to receiving ever-shrinking sound bites. Second, there are opportunities for citizens to reflect on those messages. They do not have to respond instantaneously. . . . Third, the messages can be processed interactively. Citizens can exchange reactions, . . . and test their opinions against those expressed by others.

But empirical studies of town meetings show that face-to-face assembly does not always work to teach deliberative habits or reasoned debate. Some participants experience a "burst of solidarity" and testify to the "listening, learning and changing [of] opinions" that goes on when people --who disagree but have to live as neighbors -- reason together until a prevailing sentiment becomes apparent. But not every one in a town finds it easy to talk in public. Many have a fear of expressing

foolish. Intimidation sets in, keeping significant numbers from attending or from talking if they do attend. Not surprisingly, talk at a town meeting recapitulates status inequalities in the community.

Moreover, the ideal of deliberation toward common ground is hard to practice once the era of small, homogeneous towns gives way to the large, more diverse populations of today. Even small cities are too big to be governed by face-to-face meetings. And one well-known study of a surviving small Vermont town meeting traces the breaking apart of the deliberative ideal once developers catering to tourism bought property in a farming community; the farmers and developers had such diametrically opposed interests about zoning ordinances that debate collapsed into angry shouting matches. In the presence of such actual conflicts of interest, face-to-face deliberation should not be idealized as a cure-all for conflict.

(b) The Town Meeting as a Way to Empower Ordinary Citizens

The second democratic virtue of the town meeting was that it placed the power of government in the hands of ordinary citizens. Throughout American history, the town meeting has been the premier, and often the only, example of "direct democracy." "It is a consequence of this institution," Emerson noted in praise,

that not a school house, a public pew, a bridge, a pound, a mill-dam, hath been set up, or pulled down, or altered, or bought, or sold, without the whole population of this town having a voice in the affair.

For Emerson, "having a voice in the affair" was the key to "the general contentment" that town meeting democracy delivers. The

people truly feel that they are lords
of the soil. In every winding road,
in every stone fence, in the smokes
of the poor-house chimney, . . . they
read their own power.

But real town meetings do not make "lords" of citizens quite as easily as Emerson's rhapsodic prose implies. By the twentieth century, the surviving "Massachusetts and Connecticut town meetings . . . were run by an obvious professional and business elite" sitting as an advisory committee drafting recommendations. Individuals (with little information beyond the recommendations of the committee) found it hard to dispute its recommendations. The actual meeting seemed to settle regularly into a rubber-stamping mode. The issue of whether the town meeting can be redesigned to empower ordinary citizens, as it was intended to do, is of vital concern to us in this paper.

(c) The Town Meeting as a Way to Promote Access and Equality

In theory, the traditional town meeting opened the doors of government to all equally; it made town hall a genuine marketplace of ideas, accessible to the full number and range of different points of view in the community. "In this open democracy," Emerson wrote, "every opinion had an utterance, . . . every individual his fair weight in the government." The "rich give counsel, but the poor also." But here again real town meetings lived up to Emerson's ideal of equality only

the sense that it established an "open door" policy for participation in government (at least once the racial, religious, gender, and property restrictions we noted earlier were abolished). But even in the twentieth century, the volunteer or self-selected audience that walked through the open door was rarely a representative cross section of the community. Leaving participation voluntary worked to the advantage of organized interests in the town and against marginal and minority groups. The process even favored those who lived close to town hall or who enjoyed the leisure it takes to attend political meetings in person.

In sum, the town meeting housed a powerful theory of democracy: a vision where ordinary citizens equally flock to the assembly, eager to persuade or be persuaded in turn about the common good. But no actual town meeting practices these ideals perfectly. Rates of participation have been low; a voluntary system of attendance worked to the disadvantage of the least powerful; and the ability of people to work through actual conflicts of interest has been checkered at best.

II. Democratic Goals and Problems of the Electronic Town Meeting

Over the last twenty years, a number of experiments have tried to translate the face-to-face town meeting into the televised or "electronic town meeting" (see Appendix 1). Given

the time and distance that keep many persons from

meeting is to invite more people into the process in a more equal fashion. The parent who does not have a babysitter, the worker without transportation to town hall, the elderly or frail, the person fearful of speaking in public: all these people might arguably "attend" meetings via television that they would not attend in person. Moreover, the sheer act of televising a model deliberation of ordinary citizens in debate about the common good could have important educational benefits, outstripping the quality of so-called "town meetings" on the talk shows. In all these senses, electronic communications should be welcomed as an ally in the search for ways to overcome citizen apathy and to restore substance to political dialogue.

To date, the most common format for electronic town meetings has been a marriage of television and telephone. The usual format provides a toll-free "800" number to viewers, so that they can call in responses to the meeting. A variant of this format is two-way or interactive cable television, where viewers send responses back through a computer console attached to the television set itself. In either format, the speed of modern computers permits the views of thousands of callers to be reported to the "town meeting" in a matter of seconds.

Can the town meeting be successfully translated onto the television? This depends on whether we can design electronic meetings in ways that preserve genuine deliberation and exchange

The great danger is that we will end up with a

debate entirely and invites isolated and anonymous television viewers to set government policy simply by pushing buttons at home, without ever "meeting" at all.

More specifically, a review of previous experiments with electronic democracy indicates a number of problem areas:

1. Education vs. Oversimplification. Few of the past experiments have wrestled with how to prepare citizens for informed debate at a town meeting. Television is notorious for replacing sustained discussion with passing chat. The first order of business is to televise a town meeting on complex issues (such as the deficit, health care reform, race relations, crime, or school choice) in ways that will break free of the logic of entertainment programming, delve deeply into matters and yet hold a satisfactory audience. Moreover, electronic town meetings are meaningless if they occur in a vacuum; they must form the apex of an information pyramid built up by newspapers, electronic mail, on-line data bases, prior television programs and any other medium available.

2. Empowerment. Some proponents of electronic town meetings attack representative democracy as obsolete in an age where computers can tally the votes of all instantly. They propose a new direct democracy where the people legislate through televised plebiscites or referenda. But it bears repeating that the direct democracy of plebiscites is quite different than the

... of town meetings. In fact, a plebiscite

This is why powerful leaders from Napoleon to Mussolini to Peron pioneered government by plebiscite. The holding of a yes or no vote enabled them to give the appearance of power to scattered individuals, even while controlling who spoke to the people and what ideas were heard.

For these reasons, the electronic town meeting we seek to design would not empower people to set official government policy through home voting. But then what kind of power would electronic town meetings have? What is at stake? Surely, Emerson was right to emphasize that attendance mattered at face-to-face town meetings precisely because the meeting had the actual power of local government. If "electronic town meetings" are ever to be worthy of the name, then people must understand their participation matters to government, that their views will influence their representatives. In designing experiments in 1993, we face a situation where the "electronic town meeting" can be advisory in nature only. But we should make every effort to interest office holders and news media in the advice forthcoming. We should do our utmost to stress the importance of holding a "demonstration deliberation," of modeling for the public an example of ordinary citizens struggling, often clumsily, to climb the ladder from having an opinion to defending a considered judgment. Even as a teaching example, such a demonstration could force issues onto the public agenda and frame arguments to be

problem is the tendency of electronic town meetings to have very little of the "meeting" about them. Instead, the technology continues to fascinate many with bypassing conversation altogether and satisfying citizens with instant "feedback" or home polling schemes. But town meetings should not be used as a pretext for permitting television viewers to push buttons silently and call that "participation." Feedback of the sort we typically give in polls is no substitute for deliberation. One is passive, the other active. One is instant, the other reflective.

3. Equality. Television has the potential to open the door to the town meeting wider than it has ever been opened before. But cable television systems (those most likely to be interested in our project) rarely reach more than 60-65% of homes in a local market; the cost also means generally lower rates of penetration in poor and minority neighborhoods. Thus, a new set of equality concerns has to be dealt with in the television format.

4. Manipulation. On January 4, 1986, Seattle's King TV and the Documentary Guild produced and televised a one-hour satellite-convened "international town meeting" or "citizen's summit" between residents of Seattle and Leningrad. Phil Donahue in Seattle and Vladimir Posner of the Soviet State Committee for Television and Radio were the moderators. The meeting was billed as between "just plain folks." But the performance of the Leningrad group betrayed a governmental script. In a discussion

presence but Leningraders thought their nation free of it. Dissident Andrei Sakharov was in prison "because he was a traitor;" the Soviets shot down a Korean Air passenger plane because it was really a spy plane, and so on. Here was a perfect modern example of town meeting government as puppet government.

Town meetings in the United States are unlikely to have their strings pulled in this way. Still, manipulation comes in many forms. On January 28, 1992, CBS broadcast a "national town meeting" called "America on Line." The program ended with gripping images of homelessness. Even as these images lingered, viewers were asked to call in votes on President Bush's handling of the economy. Not surprisingly, the referendum produced a far more negative vote on the economy than did a simultaneously and scientifically conducted poll (53% of call-in respondents said they were "worse off" than a year ago, while only 32% of the representative sample said the same).

In 1992, many thoughtful observers pointed out the authoritarian pitfalls in the design of electronic town halls that leave government in control of the televised presentation of issues and alternatives to the people. These critics included Walter Goodman, Anna Quinlen, and Anthony Lewis in the New York Times, Elizabeth Drew in the New Yorker, and Jean Bethke Elshtain in the Wall Street Journal. Indeed, the use of the word "fascism" to describe visions of a President avoiding Congress and taking his case directly to ill-prepared and easily conned

widespread that we must be aware of the negative connotations that the phrase "electronic town meetings" may now carry.

5. Representative Sample Problem. As mentioned above, the CBS "America on Line" program was roundly criticized for presenting results from a self-selected, unscientifically chosen "call-in" audience. Another recent example of skewed electronic town meetings occurred on Wednesday, September 16, 1992 during Ted Koppel's late-night Viewpoint show. In the program, a studio audience questioned a panel of journalists on the subject of media bias. Apparently, there was no attempt on the part of the producers to assure that the questioners would comprise a representative cross-section of the community. Instead, the identity of questioners showed that various groups, ranging from Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam to the conservative Concerned Women of America had arranged to send spokespersons to "represent" their group at the meeting. The resulting pattern of questions was noticeably idiosyncratic.

III. Designing the Electronic Town Meeting: Practical Issues

How can we design electronic town meetings in ways that will invite more people into the political process, and yet not flirt with the dangers discussed in the previous sections? The overall key is to highlight the need for more deliberation, not more instant polls. But following are more specific design issues:

1. Venue. The technology gives us a choice face to face

meetings as well as local ones. We might want to experiment with a range of venues from local to national. The advantage of a national town meeting is that all sections of the country could see it as a model or example relevant to them. The national meeting would also attract the most attention. The advantage of a local meeting is that it is more likely to recreate the intimacy and influence of a real town meeting.

We might also hold several town meetings simultaneously in each major region of the country. If the same issue were discussed at each meeting, we would achieve the equivalent of a national town meeting. Alternatively, we could do what Professor James Fishkin has proposed for his national "deliberation poll:" we could select a random sample nationally, physically transport these persons to one location and hold a national town meeting there composed of regional representatives. Or we could follow the lead of the Seattle and Leningrad "Citizen's Summit" described above and form an "electronic bridge" between two separate local town meetings.

2. Issue: Each town meeting should be devoted to a single issue, in order to assure discussion in depth. The chosen issue should be one that can prompt an open exchange of ideas. Thus, we should stay clear of debating the so-called "family value" or "social" issues (such as abortion or school prayer), where views are often fixed. By contrast, there is fluidity in people's views about free trade versus protectionist policies or what to

schools. (The deficit is an excellent example where the common interest in reduction is stymied by the efforts of different groups to block reforms that would hurt their special programs. It thus provides the kind of issue where a citizen's town meeting might achieve a consensus that interest-group driven discussions will not. Query whether the new citizen's movement on the deficit, led by retiring Senator Warren Rudman and former Senator Paul Tsongas, would be interested in holding an electronic town meeting?)

3. Agenda Setting/Editorial Control: Who should choose the issue and have "editorial control" over how it is presented at the meeting? A telephone survey of recent electronic town meetings reveals two different models. The predominant model is for the television station airing the meeting to insist on producing the program itself, selecting the moderators, experts, etc. The alternative is for some non-profit citizen group to originate the proposal and to negotiate for time on a local station, while insisting on retaining some degree of control over program content. The League of Women Voters would be an obvious candidate for this agenda setting role. While television stations are likely to insist on final authority over program content, we urge that electronic town meetings be designed to give independent citizen's groups a role in developing the issues.

4. Audience/Participants (1): To deal with the

to produce, we recommend a dual audience solution (a solution used by WGBH in its national PBS production on health care reform, "Condition Critical," aired on April 7, 1992). The studio audience should be pre-selected according to prevailing scientific, sampling techniques. Their deliberations will comprise a democratic cross-section of community views. But in order to involve home viewers, "unscientific" participation should be invited from any and all via 800 telephone call-in lines, two-way cable hook-ups, videoconferencing or other interactive technologies. In this way, the town meeting will remain "open" to all who wish to participate, while the studio audience will serve as a control group against which to measure the views expressed over the interactive facilities. It is imperative that the program distinguish the views of the representative audience from the views of self-selected participants.

A 1987 San Francisco electronic town meeting employed a similar but "flipped" solution. A pre-selected random sample of the city population used confidential telephone numbers to call-in their responses during a televised issues debate; the studio audience was not scientifically screened, though it was selected with some concern for diversity. The moderator's function was to confront the ongoing television discussion with the "representative views" of the community being telephoned in.

Either solution will deal satisfactorily with the

(5). Audience/Participants (2): Insofar as one goal of the town meeting is to provide an exemplary model of deliberation in action, there could be another scenario entirely in which the participants are Congressional or state representatives. Admittedly, this scenario takes some liberty with the meaning of a "town meeting." But televising an actual legislative debate would not only improve the quality of deliberation among our legislators. It would also "model" deliberative discussion for a wide audience. Ideally, provisions would then be made for follow-up interactive forums among citizens and representatives.

In a prior planning meeting in July of 1992 for this project, both Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute and Charles Firestone of the Aspen Institute argued persuasively for starting at least one experimental town meeting with a televised legislative debate (see Part III below). To a certain extent, this design is already followed by the North Carolina Agency for Public Telecommunications for its "Open/Net" programs. The agency convenes a weekly, two-hour "electronic town hall" over a satellite network of some 70 cable stations. The first hour is given over to a taped telecast of an important public meeting. During the second hour, a live call-in format permits viewers to talk about the issues raised at the meeting with the actual officials at the meeting.

6. Choice of interactive technology. Long distance telephone companies provide "800" or "900" networks that are capable of handling up to 10,000 calls in 90 seconds. MCI has provided

telephone connections for Perot's call-in vote on whether he should reenter the 1992 campaign. Call Interactive" (a joint venture of AT&T and American Express Information Services) has been used in conjunction with CBS' "American On Line" special, an ABC radio program on cancer, a U.S.O. fundraiser and "Wheel of Fortune."

Care should be taken to provide sufficient 800 capacity so that the experiment does not end up frustrating citizens who wish to participate with endless busy signals (as happened during the "America On Line" program, when only 314,786 calls got through out of 24.6 million attempts). Further controls must be designed to compensate for the fact that certain regions of the country have relatively less access to long distance lines than other regions.

In addition to relying on telephone call-in formats, we recommend at least one experiment with state-of-the-art two-way cable systems. Possible candidates include: KBLCOM systems in San Antonio, Minneapolis, Portland, and Upper Manhattan; Berks Community Television in Reading, Pa.; a TX or a "Big Sky" network in the West; Orlando; Sacramento or Fairfax, Virginia. Part III below discusses how we might hold a town meeting on San Antonio's two-way cable system. But any experiment with cable as the vehicle for a televised town meeting has to worry about access problems for the nonsubscriber.

7. Multiple voting from the home: Technical solutions must

meeting repeatedly via telephone or two-way cable. On the other hand, technical solutions must also be found to permit more than one person at each household to participate electronically in the meeting.

IV. Three Scenarios for an Electronic Town Meeting

This section lays out three scenarios for holding actual electronic town meetings. The first scenario maps out a local town meeting; we use San Antonio and San Francisco as two cities (among many others) which have both the technology for and interest in a town meeting. The second scenario televises an actual deliberation in Congress (via C-SPAN) or the California Legislature (via the California Channel) and plays with ways to add an interactive dimension where citizens could participate before or after the legislative debate. The third scenario chooses a topic of national concern, and holds simultaneous "issue forums" with small groups of representative citizens in each geographical region of the nation. These scenarios are mere sketches at this point, proposed only to promote discussion at our October meeting.

(a) Local Town Meetings

(1) San Antonio's Cable System

We propose holding a local town meeting in some city or town where the existing cable system has in place the necessary interactive technology. Preliminary discussions have been held

Reading, Pa. (Ann Sheehan, Executive Director) and KBL-TV in San Antonio (Sharon Blankenship, Vice-President and General Manager). Both cable systems are eager to experiment with electronic town meetings. BCTV already does a great deal of public access political programming on its two channels; San Antonio does not. But San Antonio does have state of the art interactive capacity, good market penetration, and is a city with a more national profile than Reading. The following scenario works out how an electronic town meeting might take place in San Antonio, though the choice of venue is entirely open.

San Antonio is a city of 935,739 (1990 Census) in Bexar County (population of 1,185,394 or 409,043 households). San Antonio Paragon Cable, a subsidiary of KBLCOM of Houston, is subscribed to by approximately 258,000 households in the county, for a market penetration of 63.1% as of November, 1991. City and county both have sizeable Hispanic and Anglo communities (San Antonio has 520,192 persons of Hispanic origin, 339,015 Anglos or whites of non-Hispanic origin). Apparently penetration among Hispanic households lags behind and is estimated at about 30.2% (Appendix 2). Accurate figures about the number of Hispanic households subscribing to Paragon are hard to come by and requires further research.

KBL-TV is the advertising sales arm of the Paragon cable system. It also does its own programming on Channel 26 of the system. KBL-TV is licensed by Zenith Corporation to use an interactive technology called "Z-View." 30,000 households have

Z-View in the county. Currently, its major use is to permit subscribers to "interact with the KBL-TV advertiser by responding electronically to an offer." A research report available from the Markle Foundation describes the technology of "Z-View" in detail. In essence, a set-top converter and remote control device permit home viewers to communicate back to the cable system's central computer and order an advertised product or pay-per view movie or other program. The two-way communication takes place in real time and the system can handle approximately 180 upstream messages per second.

What about moving from interactive ads to interactive politics? Mayor Nelson Wolff of San Antonio has dabbled on occasion with an interactive segment during his weekly "Mayor's Forum" talk show. The program begins by posing a question to viewers on a vital city issue; literally hundreds of alternative responses can be posted on the screen for viewers to choose among. (Viewers select a number on their Z-View remote, corresponding to their choice, and then push the "Star" button. For this reason, KBL-TV refers to its interactive system as "Star Response.") Star Response can poll, calculate and display the responses of the cable audience so quickly that these responses become available while the Mayor's program is still on the air, thus permitting the views of the audience to be taken into consideration, debated, and mulled over. In other words, the great advantage is that the content of the program itself can change in response to viewer responses. This is all to the good

and makes it worthwhile pursuing an experiment with political programming with Star Response. But, in terms of the values discussed in Part One above, the "push button" interactivity of Star Response will have to be supplemented by some call-in format so that home viewers can debate as well as vote.

In 1993, a San Antonio pilot project might work as follows:

1. Issue: The chosen topic should be one that can excite and animate the local audience. The issue could be of national import (e.g. health care, race relations, the deficit, schools,) or it could be particular to San Antonio. (Preliminary research shows that San Antonio is in the midst of heated debate about water scarcity. But while this issue would resonate with Western and Southwestern audiences, it might not play nationally.)

If we go forward with an experiment in San Antonio, we should invite KBL-TV to suggest the issue that it could, practically speaking, make the subject of an interactive television program. But we should use our influence to bring KBL-TV producers together with various groups in the community, so that there is from the beginning, democratic, community input into the agenda. Involving the League of Women Voters (or equivalent group) would add great legitimacy. In addition, the San Antonio Mayor's office has a "Project 90's" group already in place to discuss city priorities for the rest of the century.

2. Civic Education Prior to the Town Meeting. San Antonio has two daily papers -- the Express-News (a Hearst paper) and the

contacted and their cooperation enlisted in printing stories both about the upcoming "town meeting" and about background information on the issues. KBL-TV should televise at least one, and preferably more, shows devoted to educating voters on the issues. The League of Women Voters or other civic groups willing to be a "sponsor" of the meeting should be in charge of preparing a "guide to the issues" information pamphlet for all participants in the town meeting. (At best, this would be made available to any resident of San Antonio who requested it. The pamphlet should also be put "on line" with any service available.)

3. Participation at the Town Meeting: As discussed in Part III of this paper, the democratic credentials of the town meeting will be best if on-site participation for the meeting is limited to a scientifically chosen cross-section of Bexar County. This will control for any "stacking" attempts. Agreement should then be reached with an "800" telephone provider to handle a set volume of calls. In our judgment, this call-in phase of the town meeting need not be limited to a scientific sample. The program should make clear that the purpose of the call-in is not to conduct a poll at all but rather to invite as many people as possible into the conversation. However, if it is desired to limit telephone participation to a random sample, then a survey research firm should be employed to provide such a sample several weeks before the town meeting. These persons would then be given confidential telephone numbers to call in their responses (see

In addition to telephone call-ins, the San Antonio experiment would hinge on using its Star Response system to keep track of viewer responses and debate those responses during the program. Here, the Star Response segment might achieve its greatest legitimacy if it was made available only to a pre-selected scientific sample. This might help resolve any equal access problems between the Hispanic and Anglo communities.

(2) San Francisco

On February 23, 1987, the San Francisco Bay area group "Choosing Our Future" joined with a local ABC affiliate to plan and televise a "town meeting" on February 23, 1987 on viewer responses to the previously broadcast ABC miniseries, "Amerika." The program achieved a commercially successful audience (300,000) but the topic left something to be desired and the call-in phase still limited viewers to a "yes/no" push button response. Following this pilot program, "Choosing Our Future" created a California nonprofit corporation, "Bay Voice," to provide community input into the design of any future town meetings. In 1989, Bay Voice negotiated with the local NBC affiliate on terms for producing a televised town meeting on future growth in the Bay area. That meeting never occurred and Bay Voice has suspended operations for lack of funding. Although in limbo, the group's co-founder continues to be interested in designing electronic town meetings. Appendix 3 describes the basic components of the Bay Voice approach. Three things in particular should be noted:

- * a definite preference for broadcast over cable, in order to deal with equal participation issues;
- * design of the interactive telephone phase so that call-ins are limited to a pre-selected, scientific sample;
- * insistence on preserving as much program control in the citizen's group as possible, when it comes to selecting the issues for discussion, choice and training of moderators and presenters, and program content.

In other respects, the Bay Voice approach is in general accord with the outline presented for San Antonio.

(b) Modeling an Actual Legislature in Deliberation

A second but quite different scenario would start the town meeting right on the floor of Congress or a state legislature. Legislators would debate a general issue on television; follow-up programs would then use interactive technologies to extend the debate to ordinary citizens. C-SPAN could be approached to work on such a project with Congress. (Query as to whether a late-night network program might be interested in delayed presentation of a Senate debate, combined with live interactive dimension?) The California Channel could be approached to experiment with interactive television of legislative debates in that state.

(1) Congress

Norman Ornstein is engaged in an effort to convince House leaders to convert the end of the day, underused "special orders" period (where individual members give speeches to an empty chamber) into a time reserved for issues debate. These debates would not be tied to particular bills but would raise more general concerns. In the Senate, Ornstein is engaged in a parallel effort to have that body conduct a general debate one

evening a week during prime-time. In both chambers, the debates would be televised, providing the media carrot for filling up the room and for ratcheting up the levels of preparation. There would thus be immediate benefits in improving the deliberative workings of Congress. Ornstein envisions positive spillover effects, as the Congressional debates come to have an agenda setting effect on issues covered by commercial and public television stations.

To widen the net and involve ordinary citizens, we would want to add some sort of interaction between citizen and legislator after the floor debate. House or Senate members who participated in the debate would no doubt accept an invitation to continue the debate on television with a representative sample of citizens in their region of the nation; we could string together a series of these regional forums. The televised forums could include a call-in segment to widen the participation even further.

(2) California Legislature

The California Channel is an independent company distributing television coverage of the California Assembly and Senate by satellite to over 3,000,000 cable subscribers. In conversations with Paul Koplin of the channel, we have learned that the service is already engaged in its own efforts to design electronic town meetings. We anticipate having further information and an opportunity at our October conference to

(c) Public Agenda Foundation Model Forums

A third possible scenario for town meetings is a variant of our first scenario. The Public Agenda Foundation has compiled an impressive track record when it comes to running forums for citizen groups in various regions of the nation. The aim of their forums is precisely to "evoke a kind of public conversation and consideration among typical citizens" that moves participants from "first opinions to informed judgment." Given the know-how of Public Agenda in conducting substantive interchanges among citizens, it may be that we do not need to "reinvent the wheel." Conversations between Edith Bjornson of the Markle Foundation and Debra Wadsworth of the Public Agenda Foundation indicate there may be ways to use interactive technologies to "magnify" the kinds of issue forums that Public Agenda typically runs, and to invite a larger community to go through the same process of moving from first opinions to reasoned judgment that the forums teach. Specific proposals will be discussed at our October conference. But in preliminary form, the Public Agenda approach calls for the following: (1) five model forums distributed geographically through the nation; (2) selection of venues that offer the possibility of "magnifying" the forum through interactive technologies; (3) prior to the forums, use of interactive technologies to survey starting opinions of the community on the issue to be debated. This would give us a benchmark of where opinions are prior to deliberation; (4) participants at each forum site selected so as to be a cross-

section of that region's population; (5) a minimum of fifty participants per site; (6) background "issue book" to be provided to all participants; (7) selection and training of moderators in how to lead a discussion that ensures pro and con analysis of each alternative presented; (8) call-in or interactive dimension from home viewers; (9) following the forums, use of interactive technologies to see what movement, if any, took place in those who watched the forums.

V. Conclusion

Our designs for electronic town meetings seek to accomplish the twin goals of increasing and equalizing civic education and civic participation in government. We have highlighted the special role deliberation plays in a democracy -- the elevation and enlightenment of opinion that comes when citizens exchange views and reconsider their own preconceptions in light of the views and arguments of others.

The particular suggestions in this paper for how to run an electronic town meeting are hardly solutions to all the problems that inevitably surface when ideals are translated into practice. But we hope the suggestions will provide a useful roadmap for the discussions of the October working group.

APPENDIX 1

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Select List of Electronic Town Meetings

1. 1973: Choices for '76: five town meetings broadcast on eighteen New York area television stations on issues of regional development.
2. 1976: Berks Community Television: interactive political meetings on cable television.
3. 1977: Alaska Legislature holds live interactive hearings via radio, television and telephone from remote teleconferencing studios.
4. 1977: National Town Meeting: President Carter convenes two-hour "radio town hall," takes questions from forty-two persons in twenty-six states.
5. 1977: QUBE begins interactive programming in Columbus, Ohio area. Defunct by 1984. Some polling.
6. 1978: Hawaii Televote: scientific sample convened to vote unofficially alongside state constitutional convention. Provided information in advance, vote by telephone. Subsequently used in New Zealand and Los Angeles.
7. 1979: Tristate League of Women Voters: organizes six televised town meetings on planning in the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut area.
8. 1980: Alaska Televised Town Meeting: on transportation.
9. 1980: ABC News: conducts much criticized instant "900" telephone call-in poll on who won the first Carter-Reagan debate.
10. 1984: Open/Net: North Carolina Agency for Public Telecommunications begins weekly televised town halls, focusing on actual legislative debates.
11. 1986: Citizen's Summit: town meeting style television bridge connecting people in Seattle and Leningrad.
12. 1987: Choices for the Future: sponsors television call-in in San Francisco on viewer responses to controversial ABC miniseries, "Amerika."
13. 1989: Santa Monica: establishes interactive data base for information about or questions to local (Public Electronic Network)

Union address featuring "800" telephone poll of viewer responses.

15. 1992: GEnie: Candidate Jerry Brown answers questions live on computer service for forty minutes.
16. 1992: Prodigy: questions and answers with Presidential candidates on bulletin board service; on-line information about state races.
17. 1992: Condition Critical: PBS program on health care with call-in referendum on health care reform.
18. 1992: ABC: National Town Meeting with Ross Perot taking questions with people at remote video facilities.
19. 1992: Nova Scotia: Liberal Party elects provincial party leader through "900" telephone poll.
20. 1992: Perot: holds telephone referendum on whether supporters wish him to re-enter presidential race. "800" number can record only "yes" votes.
21. (--): National Issues Forum: conducted in hundreds of communities. In-depth discussions of three or four key issues each year by grass roots groups around the nation.

APPENDIX 1

Market Penetration

Although the penetration of Paragon cable service ranges above 55% when using either total population or total households for a base, penetration among Hispanics appears low (see table below).

Two issues contribute to the seemingly low penetration of the Hispanic market. First, the methodology used by KBLCOM to determine Hispanic ethnicity of Paragon subscribers was faulty. A question was asked about race, and the following answer categories were provided: White, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Other. Many Hispanics consider themselves "white" so when they are asked such a research question, they will answer "white." Incorrect information results from this type of question in San Antonio unless the "white" and "Hispanic" categories are collapsed. To ask such a question in San Antonio, it should be separated into a race and an ethnicity question or the answer categories should be Anglo, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Other. Second, San Antonio's Hispanic population is comprised of assimilated Hispanics (the bulk of the group) and Hispanics who continue to speak only Spanish and live traditional Hispanic lifestyles. Assimilated Hispanics may have had a greater tendency than unassimilated Hispanics to answer "white" to the race question.

If we collapse the white and Hispanic answer categories from the KBLCOM survey, we find 91.8 percent of the population in Bexar County is white or Hispanic and 8.2 is black, asian or other. These statistics compare favorably with the US Census which shows 8.8 percent of the population to be black, asian or native american. When it comes to measuring ethnicity in San Antonio, the questions require specific answer categories to obtain correct information.

We can conclude from the KBLCOM survey that, at the very least, penetration of Paragon cable service is 30.2 among Hispanics in Bexar County. We do not know how high the actual penetration might be.

	Bexar County ¹	Paragon Subscribers ²	Penetration (Percent)
Total population	1,185,394	670,800	56.6
Total households	409,043	258,000	63.1
Hispanic population	589,180	177,800	30.2

¹U.S. Bureau of Census, 1990 Census

²KBLCOM random survey of Paragon subscribers, Nov. 1991

APPENDIX 3

"AMERICANS ON AMERIKA"

A Report on the Results of a Pilot Electronic Town Meeting

March, 1987

Overview

This paper summarizes the results of a pilot Electronic Town Meeting or "ETM" (a program that combines elements of a talk show, documentary, and scientific opinion poll). "AMERICANS ON AMERIKA" aired on February 23, 1987 and was produced by KGO-TV (the ABC affiliate in San Francisco) to respond to the controversial mini-series, "Amerika." The ETM used a telephone based opinion poll co-developed by Choosing Our Future (a non-partisan organization that promotes citizen dialogue through two-way TV programming) and the League of Women Voters of the Bay Area.

What is an Electronic Town Meeting?

As the modern equivalent of the New England Town Meeting, Electronic Town Meetings can bring new life to our democracy. An ETM provides a powerful way for a community to get together, talk things over, and respond to critical problems and opportunities. By obtaining live feedback from a randomly pre-selected sample of citizens, ETMs provide a reliable indication of community views. The random sample of citizens is selected in advance and votes from their homes by dialing special telephone numbers. Within two to three minutes, their "votes" are shown with computer graphics in the TV studio. ETMs enable a democratic sample of citizens to contribute their views to the climate of public opinion that guides our leaders.

The Random Sample

Unlike general call-ins (where anyone watching can "vote"), ETM feedback uses a pre-selected sample to insure that voting fairly reflects the views of the overall community. A pool of 5,000 random telephone numbers was developed by the Survey Research Center at U.C. Berkeley. Trained volunteers then phoned these random numbers three weeks before the ETM. Ultimately, 512 adult residents agreed to participate and were sent an information packet describing the voting procedure. A week before the ETM, the sample was called back and 422 persons confirmed their willingness to participate. An average of roughly 250 persons voted on questions in the ETM (which produces an error range of plus or minus 6 percentage points).