Cyberspace — The Way of Future Votes[*]

Harold Thimbleby, Middesex University

Using a ballot box is so terribly quaint. In Britain, there is a policeman, a couple of volunteers, some bits of paper with curious holes in, a booth where there is a pencil and curtain, and finally the battered metal ballot box, with a padlock. It all may have looked state of the art in the twelfth century. Instead, we could be using the superhighway, and it would be so easy we could have referenda on all sorts of issues. Individuals up and down the country could easily find out what issues of importance were — from their digital televisions — and they could make their preferences known. Representatives in parliament would know what the country really thought, rather than what the media told it, and democracy would improve.

It is all the sort of fantasy that makes Star Trek seem realistic. On Star Trek, the characters use computers in everyday ways, to talk to and to solve problems. It is even possible to fly alien ships. Yet we know that, us twentieth century earthlings have trouble using our faxes, photocopiers, video recorders, let alone our PCs and printers. The problems are not just ours because we are stupid, the systems crash and do all sorts of terrible things on their own. In other words, fun as it might be to daydream about the magic of technology, in reality, the process of democracy is not about to be transformed for the better.

Let's take some simpler problems, and see what a mess has been made of them. We decided to upgrade the Passport Office's computers, the Child Support Agency's computers, the London Ambulance Service — one can think of countless examples — and they all failed miserably to do what they were supposed to do. None of the systems worked on time. All were deeply embarrassing. Yet in many ways, they were all trivial systems compared with a revamping of the way we vote.

Somehow, the magic of computers blinds us to the fundamental complexity of what we are trying to achieve with them. If the government said, "Everybody must park their cars outside cities and use trams as from June 2001" we would know they were nuts. Building tram lines is obviously risky, and basing transport policies on wishful completion dates of construction projects is madness. So why require the Passport Office or the Child Support Agency to work in a particular way on a particular day, on the assumption that the computers will be there ready and working? (Probably because numerous computer companies tried to sell their souls to get the contracts — whereas the ethical ones priced themselves out of the market, or steered clear.)

Apart from the technical issues, which includes getting a secure communications system to work up and down the country, voting requires the participation of everyone, regardless of their background or training — whereas all those failed projects involved highly trained and skill operators, who would have known what they were doing. Moreover we can't seriously expect Granny to ask the virtual policeman how to move the mouse over her preferred candidate to vote for them?

What about the access issues: the single parent families in inner cities are less likely to have access to electronic voting gadgets than richer people; busy people are less likely to

find the time to use the voting systems; … Unlike tin box democracy, electronic democracy is not going to give equal opportunities.

Regardless of the practical issues, we can be sure that there are enough people out there who are excited by technology (or who will make millions on vote.com floatation) for something to be forced on the rest of us. It will probably use television sets, and allow us to cast votes. It is not obvious how it will be able to stop both multiple voting and yet allow everyone in a household to vote separately. (Maybe by the time the technology works, we will all have electronic tags so the television can tell us apart. Certainly, the furore over national ID cards will pale into insignificance.) In other words, it will give an *impression* of what people want.

If an electronic technology is developed that really works and can "do" democracy, then it won't be put in storage for the years between elections: it will end up being used all the time. We will have referenda on all sorts of issues. At least this will help train us all — including Granny — into the way to use the system: how to enter our IDs, how to vote, how to undo errors, and so on. On the other hand, we may be surveyed on so many issues that voting ceases to be the serious walk-down-to-the-polling station (or shall we watch football?) issue that it is at present. Perhaps we would be inundated with political propaganda all the time? Perhaps voting would become *too* easy, and we would get bored — just like the Swiss have with all their regular referenda? Will all the voting be combined with the Government's urges to do censuses? Will we be sure that our voting is really as secret as it is with the tin ballot box?

In practice, it will be much more convenient to work out what people want from what they do rather than by getting them to vote. Already, as we surf the web, cookies (and our ISPs) keep track of our activities, from which it is possible to work out all sorts of things. This information is directly useful to businesses who want to make money out of us. Indeed, it is clear that business will be more motivated to find out what we want than government — who once in power, can easily be voted out. The most serious point is this: if we ever work out how to vote electronically, you can be sure that the very same technology will be used for other purposes. Financial markets will like to know which brands I 'vote for.' Voting technology will represent too great a temptation for business intrustion into our private lives. Resistance is futile (as Star Trek's "we are one mind" Borg put it when they try to assimilate every other civilisation into the collective).

I think there are two important lessons to be learnt. First, technology is much harder to get to work than we ever expect, especially when it involves people. Secondly, when we dream dreams, they tend to have a perfection that reality rarely matches. Indeed, our love affair with computer technology is better compared to idolatry. Every so often computers let us down — just as idols do — and rather than accept that we have false gods, we go about investing more in our superstitions, and hoping they will be better tomorrow. If it doesn't rain today, we sacrifice a bigger sheep. If our computer crashes, we buy more RAM. It is time to challenge the religion of upgrading to nowhere, and stop living like mice.

Two thirds of the way through the article, and all I've said is that technology is mad, especially when it comes to democracy. Surely there is something good about it? It represents progress, doesn't it?

The internet is the largest single thing humans have ever built, and it connects more people than have ever been connected before. If we want to, we can find out what is going on almost anywhere in the world. In many cases, we can participate in specialised discussions on issues that affect people. We can join pressure groups in the Amazon, or

help with human rights in obscure parts of the world. Equally, people in difficulties can gain access to information from us. They can have hope, and help with their needs for practical knowledge. When funnelled through the editorial machinery of mass media, our hearts are moved and financial aid flows to needy causes.

Without qualification, the potential for doing good is stunning.

Somehow we have to build up the multinational community spirit to make the world a better place, without being side-tracked by seductive schemes. The simplest question to ask is, "Who benefits?" If the person who benefits is outside of the community, the technology is suspicious. If multinational corporations benefit, rather than grass-roots communities, the technology is suspicious. If the technology reduces diversity, then it is less likely to help human communities than the people in control of them. But it is not so easy to know who benefits. Often enough, everyone benefits, but in different ways: thus, Microsoft is rich, but I can use my computer thanks to them. Occasionally, we think we benefit, but we are deceived — a flaw that drug pushers exploit! The simplest question to ask, then, is not probing enough by far.

A better question is, "How easy is it to change?" If technological solutions are not easy to change, then their proponents will be trying hard to force their ready-made solutions on us; if they cannot change and adapt them, they will probably be pretending the so-called solutions are *just perfect* for us as they are. Or, when next year, the so-called solutions are obsolete, can they be changed, or do we have to throw them away and replace them? If we have to keep replacing them, they are hardly good solutions but part of the problem. Few technologies work perfectly, and even fewer can work well with the unpredictable ways they will be used by humans. If they cannot be changed, then they will fail.

If we do end up going down the road to electronic democracy, we can be sure it will not work quite as we expect, even if the technology works exactly as planned (which it won't). Instead, it will have to be changed to make it better suited to what it is really helping communities to do. The first thing to do will be to use it to vote it into something that works for us, and if it cannot cope with that sort of change, it cannot be part of a democratic process.

In our moments of lucidity, we know that appearance and value are different, and that the modern world is confusing the two in our mind. No longer is tasty looking food good for us! This is obvious. Computers are no different: they can be made to look wonderful, despite their structural failings. If we keep on asking what they really do for us, rather than allowing our imagination to be carried away by sales-patter, we may have the presence of mind to ask for a world we can make better, rather than a revolutionary upgrade. This, basically, is what democracy is for anyway.