

# Conscious Democracy Through Electronic Town Meetings

by *Duane Elgin*

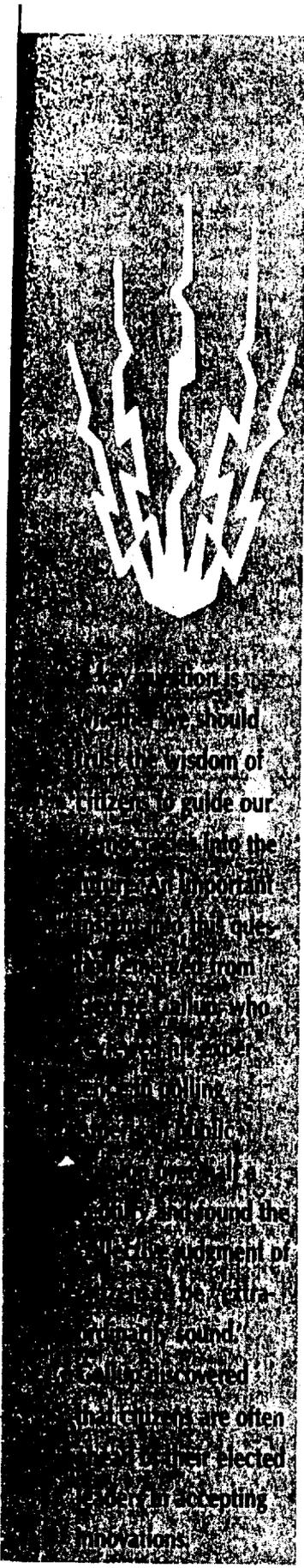
**D**EMOCRACY HAS OFTEN BEEN CALLED "the art of the possible." If we don't know how our fellow citizens think and feel about issues, then we don't know what is possible — we float powerless in a sea of ambiguity and are unable to mobilize ourselves into constructive action. When we don't know how others think and feel about various options, then the political process can be easily manipulated — and this is the condition in which we now find ourselves. The most powerful and direct way to revitalize our democracy is by improving our ability to know our own minds as a community of citizens.

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*illustration by Brad Hamann*

Given that we can trust the wisdom of the citizenry, the challenge is to find a way to regularly pool the good judgment and foresight of the public.

To cope with problems of massive scale — environmental pollution, resource depletion, species extinction, etc. — citizens must communicate at a level equal to the challenges we face. Because less than one percent of the U.S. population uses computer bulletin boards, these networks have not yet grown to a sufficient scale to support the level of citizen dialogue and consensus-building required by our times. So what practical tools do we have that can genuinely enable a democracy to become conscious of its views — to "know its own mind?"



Television dominates the social awareness of developed nations. In the U.S., at least 98 percent of all homes have a TV set, the average person watches more than four hours per day, and most people get a majority of their information about the world from television. Television has become the social brain or central nervous system of modern societies. The challenge is to devise ways of using this already immensely powerful technology in ways that serve the communication needs of a conscious democracy.

Unscientific "people polls" are now common on television. However, this approach to two-way television has critical shortcomings. Typically, anyone watching a television program can vote "yes" or "no" on an issue by dialing a number shown on the TV screen. By opening feedback to all viewers, it often takes an hour or more to get a single response, and then there is no assurance that the feedback is representative of the views of the overall public; instead, it may only reflect the views of a special interest group that invested the time and money to call. This crude barometer of public sentiment is not sufficiently fast or trustworthy to meet the needs of a modern democracy.

For a conscious democracy to function, citizens and decision-makers must be able to obtain an accurate and trustworthy sense of overall public sentiment. Also, feedback must be fast enough to enable citizens to give more than a one-time, kneejerk response to an issue during an hour-long program. We need processes that enable citizens to answer multiple questions that test the strength, texture, depth, and intensity of public sentiment on critical public-policy issues.

We can obtain rapid and representative feedback by gathering responses (via telephone-based, dialed-in voting) from a preselected, scientific sample of citizens. Just as a doctor can take a very small sample of blood and use it to acquire a highly accurate picture of the condition of your entire body, we can similarly use random or scientific samples to get a highly reliable sense of overall community views. Further, because of the limited size of a representative sample, citizens' votes can be tabulated very rapidly, thereby enabling multiple questions and interactions.

Because representative approaches are already used to run democracies, and because scientific procedures for assuring

fair representation are well developed, obtaining feedback from a random sample represents an excellent solution to our needs. By relying upon a scientific sample, a community or nation can obtain inputs from a trustworthy cross-section of citizens (who would be called several weeks in advance of a televised "town meeting" and asked to participate). Those who agree to participate are sent a list of phone numbers that correspond to various options (yes/no, multiple choice, intensity) and that they can call to register their views on the night of the Electronic Town Meeting. By dialing a particular number, they can register their agreement or disagreement with various options or express the intensity of their sentiments. This kind of telephone-based, scientific feedback can be obtained in the TV studio in three minutes or less and then be displayed with computer graphics for everyone to see. By combining representative feedback with an informative documentary and in-studio dialogue that employs conflict-resolution skills, a community can know its own mind with a high degree of accuracy on the key issues of the day.

**A** representative approach to mass community dialogue and feedback was tested successfully in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1987, with a prime-time "Electronic Town Meeting." This pioneering experiment was developed through the cooperative efforts of a nonpartisan media organization ("Choosing Our Future"), the local ABC-TV station, and the League of Women Voters. The program was viewed by more than 300,000 persons; six "votes" were taken during the hour. As questions came into focus, the preselected random sample of citizens was invited to dial in their vote on an issue. Because feedback was so fast, the community was easily able to ask itself a half-dozen questions during the pilot "ETM."

With weekly or monthly Electronic Town Meetings in major metropolitan areas across the nation as well as regular national ETMs, a new level of communication and accountability could be established between the public and decision-makers. Because this feedback would be strictly advisory, it respects the responsibility of decision-makers to give feedback to those who govern. The biggest challenge we now face is to evolve the art and practice of conscious democracy in the communications era. ■

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