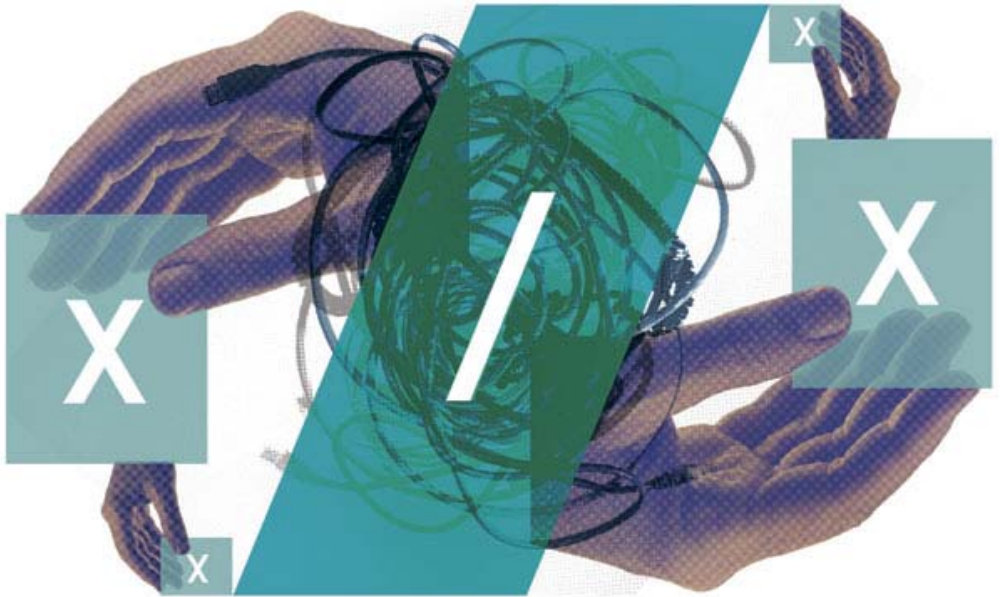


'Athens' on the Net

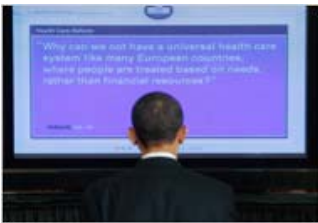


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PERHAPS the biggest big idea to gather speed during the last millennium was that we humans might govern ourselves. But no one really meant it.

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Jim Young/Reuters

'VIRTUAL' TOWN HALL President Obama in March took questions via the Internet. "Richard" asked about health care, but the online fervor concerned legalizing marijuana.

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What was really meant in most places was that we would elect people to govern us and sporadically renew or revoke their contracts. It was enough. There was no practicable way to involve all of us, all the time.

The headlines from Washington today blare of bailouts, stimulus, clunkers, Afpak, health care. But it is possible that future historians, looking back, will fixate on a quieter project of [Barack Obama's](#) White House: its exploration of how government might be opened to greater public participation in the digital age, of how to make self-government more than a metaphor.

[President Obama](#) declared during the campaign that "we are the ones we've been waiting for." That messianic phrase held the promise of a new style of politics in this time of tweets and pokes. But it was vague, a paradigm slipped casually into our drinks. To date, the taste has proven bittersweet.

Federal agencies have been directed to release online information that was once sealed; reporters from Web-only publications have been called on at news conferences; the new portal Data.gov is allowing citizens to create their own applications to analyze government data. But the most revealing

efforts have been in “crowdsourcing”: in soliciting citizens’ policy ideas on the Internet and allowing them to vote on one another’s proposals.

During the transition, the administration created an online “Citizen’s Briefing Book” for people to submit ideas to the president. “The best-rated ones will rise to the top, and after the Inauguration, we’ll print them out and gather them into a binder like the ones the president receives every day from experts and advisors,” [Valerie Jarrett](#), a senior adviser to Mr. Obama, wrote to supporters.

They received 44,000 proposals and 1.4 million votes for those proposals. The results were quietly published, but they were embarrassing — not so much to the administration as to us, the ones we’ve been waiting for.

In the middle of two wars and an economic meltdown, the highest-ranking idea was to legalize [marijuana](#), an idea nearly twice as popular as repealing the Bush tax cuts on the wealthy. Legalizing online poker topped the technology ideas, twice as popular as nationwide wi-fi. Revoking the [Church of Scientology](#)’s tax-exempt status garnered three times more votes than raising funding for childhood cancer.

Once in power, the White House crowdsourced again. In March, its Office of Science and Technology Policy hosted an online “brainstorm” about making government more transparent. Good ideas came; but a stunning number had no connection to transparency, with many calls for marijuana legalization and a raging (and groundless) debate about the authenticity of President Obama’s birth certificate.

If the Internet needed a further nudge from its pedestal, the health care debate obliged. From the administration’s point of view, the Web arguably proved better at spreading deceptions about “death panels” than at spreading truth, and at turning town halls into brawls than at nurturing the unfettered deliberation that some imagine to be the hallmark of the Internet.

There is a lively debate in progress about what some call Gov 2.0. One camp sees in the Internet an unprecedented opportunity to bring back Athenian-style direct democracy. The vision is captured in a recent British documentary, “Us Now,” which paints a future in which every citizen is connected to the state as easily as to [Facebook](#), choosing policies, questioning politicians, collaborating with neighbors.

“Can we all govern?” the movie asks at the outset. (It can, of course, be [viewed on the Web](#).)

The people in this camp point to information technology’s aid to grassroots movements from Moldova to Iran. They look at India, where voters can now access, via text message, information on the criminal records of parliamentary candidates, and Africa, where cellphones are improving election monitoring. They note the new ease of extending reliable scientific and scholarly knowledge to a broad audience. They observe how the Internet, in democratizing access to facts and figures, encourages politician and citizen alike to base decisions on more than hunches.

But their vision of Internet democracy is part of a larger cultural evolution toward the expectation that we be consulted about everything, all the time. Increasingly, the best articles to read are the most e-mailed ones, the music worth buying belongs to singers we have just text-voted into stardom, the next book to read is one bought by other people who bought the last book you did, and media that once reported to us now publish whatever we tweet.

In this new age, our consent is gathered every few minutes, not every few years.

Another camp sees the Internet less rosily. Its members tend to be enthusiastic about the Web and enthusiastic about civic participation; they are skeptical of the Internet as a panacea for politics. They worry that it creates a falsely reassuring illusion of equality, openness, universality.

“We live in an age of democratic experimentation — both in our official institutions and in the many informal ways in which the public is consulted,” James Fishkin, a Stanford political scientist, writes in his new book, “When the People Speak.” “Many methods and technologies can be used to give voice to the public will. But some give a picture of public opinion as if through a fun-house mirror.”

Because it is so easy to filter one’s reading online, extreme views dominate the discussion. Moderates are underrepresented, so citizens seeking better health care may seem less numerous than poker fans. The Internet’s image of openness and equality belies its inequities of race, geography and age.

Lies spread like wildfire on the Web; Eric Schmidt, the chief executive of Google, no Luddite, warned

[Wikipedia](#) plans to add a layer of editing — remember editing? — for articles on living people.

Perhaps most menacingly, the Internet's openness allows well-organized groups to simulate support, to "capture and impersonate the public voice," as Mr. Fishkin wrote in an e-mail exchange.

There is no turning back the clock. We now have more public opinion exerting pressure on politics than ever before. The question is how it may be channeled and filtered to create freer, more successful societies, because simply putting things online is no cure-all.

"At this moment, the conversation is not whether the Internet is important and is going to be widespread," said Clay Shirky, an Internet theorist and the author of "Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations." He added, in a telephone interview: "Now that it is so important, it's actually too important not to think through the constitutional and governance issues involved."

A search is on for the right metaphor. What is the new role for government — a platform? a vending machine, into which we put money to extract services? a facilitator? And what, indeed, is the new role for us — the ones we've been waiting for?

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