ALI ALMOSSAWI AND CESAR A HIDALGO. Going beyond the one-bit democracy

Making the world a bit more democratic by any definition

William Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams had foreseen the possibility of direct online participation. Would they have had the means to prevent the emergence of these new technological vehicles? As with most historical hypotheses, we will never know. We are in 2012, however, and despite the internet most countries are

As with most historical hypotheses, we will never know. We are in 2012, however, and despite the internet most countries are still stuck in one-bit democracies, where people are required to choose between two alternatives every four to six years.

People in the developed world, however, are not thrilled with the outcomes of one-bit democracies. In The US, the Pew Research Center indicates that national satisfaction is only 31 per cent. In Chile, OPI reports that 47 per cent of the population do not feel identified with either the left, right, or centre. The list goes on.

But who could blame people for their discontent? One-bit democracies have important limitations, in the obvious requirement to choose candidates rather than issues. This forces the smallest bandwidth available in a political system on candidates rather than on relevant issues. Hence, the epidemic of off-the-court hard-sell marketing which exerts a cumulative influence not surprising. Moreover, the large degree of fame required to be an eligible candidate limits the ability of one-bit democracies to refresh their candidate pools. Political fame is a barrier to entry, a scarce resource that a few have learned to capture.

This time around, however, technology is ready to provide alternatives. The widespread adoption of social media and online forums, and the ability of digital democracies to have always been waiting for, if we give it a little push.

But do we want to democratise participation to the extreme? And if we do, why shouldn’t the ability of people to decide on issues reduce people’s incentives to get informed. Why learn about the consequences of immigration or the legality of marijuana, if I am only allowed to contribute one bit? If I am only allowed to select a policy bundle, wrapped as in a good and easy promise? If my portfolio of views is not reflected by any of the available political parties, should I even consider participating at all?

We need direct online participation because people tend to see the decisions they make, more than the decisions made for them by those whom they have chosen to represent them. Direct forces of online participation not only empower people with the power to decide, but will also help transfer the political responsibility of their decisions back to them. In direct participation, each individual can count on their decisions.

Certainly, online methods will be a complement to existing social structures. There are technical issues for which direct participation might not be the best option. For other issues, however, direct forms of online participation seem natural. Examples of these include big questions, such as gay rights, abortion, gun law and the legality of drugs, and small questions, such as the nonconstruc- tion of parks, football pitches, and other public amenities. In future, the challenge will be to discover what direct forms of participation work best for us, and how to create active communities around them. This will involve technical challenges, but more importantly the policy work of in-person governments and mass-media. Bringing power, however, should not be the hard decision in a world where this article will be useless in less than a century. ALI ALMOSSAWI, an MIT alumnus, works for Mozilla Corporation. Cesar A Hidalgo is an associate professor of media arts and sciences at the Media Lab