

**Politricksnology**  
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## **Bottom-Up Politics**

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## Introduction

*Politricks* (Dec 2006) established a theoretical framework for the defense of civil liberties in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, building on the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment's recognition of every citizen's obligation to be both patriot and watchdog, prepared to respond to threats both internal and external. The open-source Dissidence Toolkit was developed to enable secure communication in an uncertain world, using firewall penetration, traffic anonymization, and exotic packet routing; the modern militia needs not guns or bombs, merely information.

The project's secondary purpose is community development and the establishment of secure communications infrastructure for groups. Embracing tools of mass collaboration and peer production enables a new generation of citizens to be more informed and involved in the decision-making that very directly affects their lives, and the availability of tools that allow them to do this is critical to its continued growth. The first half of this paper will provide an overview of the Internet-based efforts of many politicians, journalists, activists, and citizens and the specific technologies and models of participation employed.

The second half of this paper will provide an overview and analysis of current techniques in crowdsourcing and public engagement. Businesses are increasingly embracing the phenomenon of crowdsourcing, where the audience is tapped to help develop new products, effectively replacing the company's R&D department. Groups operating in the

public service -- perpetually behind the times -- should be watching and learning how these companies interact with their customers and should be learning from their successes and mistakes. This paper will also present the results of a small-scale survey conducted on the desirability and perceived quality of crowdsourced materials, in the hopes of better understanding how consumers (citizens) will react to applications of crowdsourcing to developing public goods. Additionally we will introduce the Poliwonk project, a new website dedicated to communally documenting otherwise opaque issues.

## Citizen Politics

The Internet increasingly allows for people interested in specific fields to coalesce around centralized collaborative information sources like blogs and wikis. Political bloggers in particular have attracted attention from the mainstream media for breaking – or perhaps simply recognizing earlier – a number of mid-profile issues: <sup>1</sup>

- Former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott publicly stated that U.S. Senator and former presidential candidate Strom Thurmond, who ran on a segregationist platform in 1948, would have made a good president. Jon Marshall and other bloggers kept the story alive and drew media attention to Lott’s statement, his previous comments along the same lines, and his association with groups like the Council of Conservative Citizens, a group which supports white separatism.
- 2004 presidential hopefuls Howard Dean and Wesley Clark enjoyed a large amount of political buzz on the Internet before they were taken seriously as candidates by traditional media outlets.
- In the final weeks of the 2004 Presidential Campaign, Conservative bloggers heavily criticized a *60 Minutes* story which claimed to have evidence of favoritism towards George W. Bush during his National Guard service in the 1970s. Blogs such as Little Green Footballs and Powerline raised questions about the authenticity of CBS's documents that were followed up in the mainstream

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<sup>1</sup> “Political blogger,” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political\\_blogger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_blogger)

media. CBS eventually admitted the documents could not be verified and retracted the accusations.

These scandals – more gossip than issue – generally involved the kind of large-audience soapboxing and public-record-digging that was significantly more difficult before the advent of the Internet. These amateur journalists have proven that they have a voice that is heard – or perhaps a voice that is more in tune with what else is being said – and their influence and potential to break stories should not be underestimated.

The last several years have also seen a sharp rise in the number of citizen-generated political databases, which have become an invaluable resource for press and interested citizens alike. The databases are largely focused on illustrating connections between political funding and political decision-making -- datasets which the government has not seen necessary to analyze themselves. These databases are a natural response to the flavor of transparency often practiced by politicians and government agencies, which has been traditionally limited to hardcore journalists digging through dusty basements under close scrutiny. As the administrators of Opensecrets.org are discovering, more accessible information genuinely means increasingly everyday people can access and understand it:

A survey conducted last month by Opensecrets.org found that 45 percent of its users identified themselves as "interested citizens" rather than journalists, activists, educators or political consultants. Further, 59 percent of its users said they use the site for personal -- not professional -- reasons.

In the past, Krumholz says, Opensecrets.org counted the press as its "No. 1 client," a relationship becoming less and less necessary as citizens begin to research political topics themselves.<sup>2</sup>

The digital revolution is more and more becoming a two-edged sword: not only can the government more closely watch you, but now you might be able to snoop on them – and hold them accountable.

### ***Internet Campaigning***

The Pew 2006 US election online report illustrates the dramatic increase in the Internet as an resource for information on current politics:<sup>3</sup>

Twice as many Americans used the Internet as their primary source of news about the 2006 campaign compared with the most recent mid-term election in 2002.

Some 15% of all American adults say the Internet was the place where they got most of their campaign news during the election, up from 7% in the mid-term election of 2002.

A post-election survey shows that the 2006 race also produced a notable class of

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<sup>2</sup> "Web mashups turn citizens into Washington's Newest Watchdogs," *Wired Magazine*, April 26<sup>th</sup> 2007, <http://www.wired.com/politics/law/news/2007/04/maplight>

<sup>3</sup> Pew 2006 US election online report, [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/199/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/199/report_display.asp)

online political activists. Some 23% of those who used the Internet for political purposes – the people we call campaign Internet users – actually created or forwarded online original political commentary or politically-related videos.

Additionally, presidential candidates Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, and Bill Richardson made the announcements of their intent by posting a video on their respective websites.<sup>4</sup> Further evidence that the Internet is making waves in US politics, albeit largely as a marketing tool and not necessarily a platform for genuine participation.

### ***Political Resources Online***

- MapLight: <http://www.maplight.org/maplight/> (database/visualization) – combines information on campaign contributions and votes in the California legislature, providing “an unprecedented window into the connections between money and politics.”
- National Institute on Money in State Politics: <http://www.followthemoney.org/> (database/visualization) – provides a searchable database of political contributions in all 50 states. “Money in state politics plays a pivotal role in shaping public policy in individual states and across the nation.”
- Fund Race, <http://fundrace.org/> (database/visualization) -- a geo-visualization by

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<sup>4</sup> “Hillary and the Democrats choose web as the new deal”, The Guardian, Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup> 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1995721,00.html>

Mark Frumin which maps 2004 presidential campaign contributions to their physical locations (e.g. find out who people in your area donate to)

- Congresspedia (wiki),  
<http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Congresspedia> -- “the Citizens Encyclopedia on Congress”, documents in great detail going on in the US congress and environs. Part of the Center for Media & Democracy.
- Sunlight Foundation (blog/informational): <http://www.sunlightfoundation.com/> -- group blog, general information, and grants and contests (!) dedicated to building transparency in government. “The Sunlight Foundation was founded in January 2006 with the goal of using the revolutionary power of the Internet and new information technology to enable citizens to learn more about what Congress and their elected representatives are doing, and thus help reduce corruption, ensure greater transparency and accountability by government, and foster public trust in the vital institutions of democracy.”
- Parsons Institute for Informational Mapping “Elections & Public Opinion: USA” (visualization) -- [http://www.newschool.edu/centers/piim/PIIM\\_Tool/content.html](http://www.newschool.edu/centers/piim/PIIM_Tool/content.html) -- extremely slick electoral college visualization, with data going back to the very first presidential race. A highly visceral and interactive way to illustrate how the electoral college works – one can click a state to see what the outcome would have been if that state had gone the other way, and easily generate a list of swing states that can flip outcomes. Wonderful to “sort by power.”

- Politicopia, <http://www.politicopia.com/> (wiki) – user-generated information on Utah legislation. Default format for a page invites a Neutral Description and then Pro, Con, Amend, and Personal Experiences from readers. Particularly high profile as it was initiated by Utah state representative Steve Urquhart and sports testimonials from other legislators whose decisions were allegedly determined by what they had read on the site (!)
- BillHop, <http://www.billhop.com/> (wiki) – similar to Politicopia, but covering the US Congress and (currently) 8 states. Uniquely highlights more popular/controversial bills with distinctions in font size, and color codes ‘liberal’ vs. ‘conservative’ bills (most appear as a neutral white)
- ReadtheBill.org <http://www.readthebill.org/> -- advocates “an open legislative process on the floor of the U.S. Congress. ReadtheBill.org believes bills should be posted online for 72 hours for anyone to read before Congress debates them.” <http://openthegovernment.com> is an affiliate and the Sunlight Foundation is a founding partner.
- Downsize DC, <http://downsizedc.org> (lobbyist) – group aims to reduce the overall size of government and restore power to the states and people; more notable is their “Read the Bills Act,” arguing to prevent the kind of log-rolling and porkbarrel legislation which plagues Congress’ legislation. The act (or rather, petition) has been submitted to every member of congress and several hundred

members have already signed on to the idea. From their site:

- [Congress] carelessly pass mammoth bills that none of them have read.  
Sometimes printed copies aren't even available when they vote!
- Often no one knows what these bills contain, or what they really do, or what they will really cost.
- Additions and deletions are made at the last minute, in secrecy.
- They combine unpopular proposals with popular measures that few in Congress want to oppose. (This practice is called “log-rolling.”)
- And votes are held with little debate or public notice.
- Oh, and once these bills are passed, and one of these unpopular proposals comes to light, they pretend to be shocked. “How did that get in there?” they say.

# Crowdsourcing

## ***Background***

Crowdsourcing is a business model in which a company or institution takes a job traditionally performed by an employee and outsources it to a group of people via an open call on the Internet. Put differently, crowdsourcing is the application of open source principles to fields outside of software. Crowdsourcing is to product development what democracy is to politics – everyone involved in their own determination. With the increased availability of ‘prosumer’ grade technology like digital cameras, video editing software, and one-click publishing, the gap between ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ has starkly diminished. Companies are encouraging consumers to offer their creative input in the hope of benefiting from the collective intelligence of their audience. Marketers at both small and large companies are beginning to use crowdsourcing as a way to promote customer interactivity, develop better products, and increase brand loyalty and recognition, in industries as varied as clothing, journalism, and software. What kind of lessons can political organizations – be they politicians, government agencies, or grassroots activists – learn from these experiences?

The modern relevance of crowdsourcing is strong; simply creating products with the consumer ‘in mind’ is no longer enough to remain competitive in today’s economy. Ever-increasing inundation by advertisers has led to an increase in consumer skepticism in the validity of advertisers’ claims. Overall consumer perception of advertising is hurt by the

false claims made by *any* advertiser.<sup>5</sup> The situation is further aggravated by the explosive growth of doing business on the Internet alongside explosive growth in the quantity of spam email, up to more than 66% of all email traffic in 2005 from 50% in 2003.<sup>6</sup> More from Peter Darke of FSU:

For companies that advertise, the lesson is clear: They must do a better job of guaranteeing the accuracy of their own and others marketers' advertising content if they want consumers to keep paying attention.<sup>7</sup>

Crowdsourcing literature largely considers it a model by which businesses might reach out to a more sophisticated consumer and benefit from their creative talents and social networks, increasing brand favorability and driving purchase intent. Jim Edwards argues that consumers seek out user-generated content “because they believe in it.”<sup>8</sup> Cambrian House invites visitors to the site to propose and help develop ideas for software in exchange for ‘royalty points’ in a kind of free-for-all venture capital market. They argue that consumers are more interested in products that they have had in creating.<sup>9</sup> These propositions are supported by well understood managerial practices: involve your team in the decision making and the decisions get enacted faster and with less fuss.

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<sup>5</sup> “The Defensive Consumer: Advertising Deception, Defensive Processing, and Distrust,” Peter Darke & Robin J.B. Ritchie,

<http://www.sauder.ubc.ca/faculty/divisions/marketing/docs/darke-ritchie-jmr-06.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> “Symantec: Spam growth slowing at last”, *InfoWorld*, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005

<sup>7</sup> “Suspicious Minds: FSU researcher documents consumers’ increasing skepticism,” Barry Ray, FSU News, <http://www.fsu.edu/news/2007/03/14/suspicious.minds/>

<sup>8</sup> “The Future of Creativity: Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control”, Jim Edwards, *Adweek*, January 02, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> “The Wisdom of Crowdsourcing”, *Profit*, Toronto: March 2007. Vol 26, Iss. 1, pp. 26

## ***The Quality Paradox***

Wikipedia has long held a bad rap among academics as being an unreliable source of information; surely, the thinking went, an army of amateurs cannot be as rigorous and accurate as a small team of professionals. The 2005 *Nature* encyclopedia head-to-head roundly disproved this fact,<sup>10</sup> and students and professors alike are warming up to the idea of citing Wikipedia, itself composed largely of citations. But how do people actually perceive products that were developed using crowdsourcing and other techniques that involve decisionmaking through wide consensus?

In collaboration with students from the Stern School of Business the author conducted a small-scale survey and an experimental research study to better deduce consumers (or rather, NYU students') opinions on crowdsourced products. The first survey discussed the concept of crowdsourcing with our subjects and tried to establish a more detailed picture of the kinds of people who participate in crowdsourcing. Additionally it attempted to define the public's perception of crowdsourcing: why do companies utilize this marketing tool, and why do consumers participate? The second part of the project was an experiment which showed participants a video commercial that was consumer generated and asked them to rate the commercial; a control group was not informed it was consumer generated.

Based on the aforementioned background literature we hypothesized:

- crowdsourcing participants are interested in seeing their input incorporated in the

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<sup>10</sup> "Internet encyclopedias go head to head", *Nature* 438, 900-901, Dec. 15, 2005

- final product as well as other incentives (cash prize, recognition, etc.)
- crowdsourcing participants will identify themselves as trendsetters and consider themselves to be very creative people
- the general public finds other consumers to be reliable sources of information
- brand loyalty will increase among participants of crowdsourcing as they feel an investment in the product and the brand
- likewise, knowledge that a product or idea was crowdsourced will lead to a higher opinion of the product and an increase in the chance that a consumer will purchase the product

A total of 61 individuals were asked to take the survey, which aimed to gain a general idea of people's perceptions towards consumer-generated products, actions that may contribute towards crowdsourcing, and opinions on the reliability of various media channels. 42% of our respondents fell under the "participants" category, meaning they have edited an entry on Wikipedia, posted a video on YouTube, posted images on Flickr or have contributed to another kind of crowdsourced product.

Question	Participant	Non-Participant	Difference
I enjoy sharing my ideas more than other people.	46%	11%	35%
I consider myself more inquisitive than others.	54%	29%	25%
I consider myself more creative than others.	46%	23%	23%
My friends often come to me for advice.	46%	26%	20%
I shop more often than my friends.	23%	9%	14%
My ideas are just as good as a professional's.	27%	17%	10%
I consider myself to be a trend-setter.	12%	3%	9%
I frequently participate in web forums or blogs.	27%	26%	1%

The most striking results in our survey suggested that Participants are much more likely to view the company in a favorable light and purchase products that have been developed through the use of crowdsourcing. For example, 15% of Participants strongly agree that companies who crowdsource are “interested in getting to know their consumer,” a 12 percentage point lead over the total sample; they are also 14% less likely to believe these companies are “mostly interested in generating profit.” Further, 27% of Participants said they were “Very likely” to purchase a crowdsourced product; a 9% lead over Non-participants. This suggests that increasing consumer participation in the company’s crowdsourcing efforts is likely to increase favorability towards the brand and reduce skepticism in their intentions. These findings support the already well-known positive effects of increased brand-consumer interactivity. To capitalize on this effect, managers should seek to make participation as simple as possible. For example, avoiding extensive forms to “create an account,” requiring special software downloads, or other barriers to participation.

The experiment, on the other hand, showed a contrasting revealed intent. Participants were shown a Sony commercial. The experimental group was informed it was developed via crowdsourcing, while the control group was not. The experimental group showed a dramatic drop in purchase-intent and the perception of ad quality. Our control group, unaware the ad was consumer-generated, responded with an average score of 2.9, almost a full point above the average score of 1.8 from our Experimental group. The Control group also rated the commercial higher – 4.6 versus 3.9 – on the attribute, “Professionally designed.” It is important to note that although 18% responded favorably towards

consumer-generated products in the survey, the experimental group was subconsciously more averse to the ad, products and brand.

Those interested in tapping into crowdsourcing should keep in mind the tradeoff between winning brand favorability through increased consumer-participation, as we found in our first survey, and losing brand favorability due to a lower perception of ad quality and purchase intent, as was revealed through experiment.

## **Crowdsourcing: Collaborative Politics**

The theory behind crowdsourcing says that involving consumers in the decision making process makes the decisions stickier; crowdsourcing makes the product sell, keeps people coming back, and certainly produces product at lower cost than hiring actual employees. Our experiment, on the other hand, revealed a subconscious opinion of crowdsourced products as lower in quality and thus less attractive. So how can crowdsourcing successfully translate to a process like politics, where the products are less tangible, the diversity of opinions much greater, the passions heated, and the chain of accountability so much more important?

Surowiecki, in *The Wisdom of Crowds*, proposes the idea that a "diversity of opinion" is critical to a crowd being wise rather than merely a mob. Jeff Howe, in the June issue of

Wired, also writes of wise crowds as needing to be "dispersed" and that the "crowd is full of specialists." Proposed below are three different ways of interpreting diversity and an analysis of how each of these very different varieties of diversity is necessary for a crowd to be wise, and thus for a crowdsourcing application to succeed.

### ***Diversity of identity***

According to many scholars who study identity, diversity—in terms of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, economic class, (dis)ability, religion, etc.—is important because each person's unique identity shapes their worldview. Thus, we can assume that differing worldviews might produce differing solutions to a problem, some of which might be superior solutions because the ideas might consider the unique needs of diverse constituencies. For instance, if you're trying to crowdsource the development of a product that can then be mass produced and sold back to the crowd, a diversity of identity in the crowd will presumably produce a product that will have appeal for a diverse range of customers. More than for products and business, though we should think of ways that diversity of identity can benefit our world; intercultural communication scholars, for example, have argued that diversity of identity and the benefits it brings to problem solving can even help foster peace, dialogue, and understanding over conflict.

### ***Diversity of skills***

Diversity of skills is a necessary distinction for crowdsourcing applications, too, because,

depending on the level of sophistication of a given problem, if the crowd does not possess the basic skills to solve a problem, then there will be fewer good solutions put forth by the crowd. If the problem is to design a clever t-shirt (as is the case with Threadless.com), the crowd must not only possess some degree of artistic creativity, but a critical mass of individuals in the crowd must also own and know how to use illustration software in order to upload t-shirt ideas to the website. If the problem were more sophisticated (developing a crisis logistics plan, for instance), or if the software needed to put forth a solution was difficult to obtain (i.e. too expensive) or difficult to master, or if the skills needed to solve a problem are only available with extensive training or schooling, then a diversity of skills will not exist in the crowd, and the problem will likely not succeed as a crowdsourcing application.

### ***Diversity of political investment***

Take an environmental sustainability problem posed to the crowd in a crowdsourcing application: if the problem was posted to a website frequented almost entirely by anti-corporate, pro-environment activists, then the chances of getting enough solutions that favored corporations added to the aggregate would be slim. Thus, instead of a sustainable environmental solution that could work for business and for the Earth, the crowd would put forth a solution that businesses would be unlikely to fully embrace. In other words, if you have a crowd whose political stance is not very diverse and you're trying to achieve a solution that will fit multiple political affiliations, you may not get an effective solution.

## ***Interpretations***

Under the umbrella of “diversity of opinion” that Surowiecki and others have called for, we have diversity of identity, diversity of skills, and diversity of political investment.

True diversity of opinion relies on each of these prongs; with one of the prongs missing, the awesome potential of the crowd as a problem solving entity is diminished.

As crowdsourcing applications evolve and new ones launch, diversity of opinion among the crowd will need to be ensured. The question is: How do we ensure it?

Though more and more people are getting connected to the Internet—the place where most crowdsourcing applications reside—there is still a giant gap between those who have the access to the technology and those who do not. The digital divide, as it is called, is perhaps the new identity politic upon which some people will gain privilege and some people will be oppressed. Considering that the digital divide follows race, class, and national lines, the fight for social justice must continue to focus on identity and access to technology.

The acquisition of skills is closely related to technology and educational access as well, which falls along race, class, gender, (dis)ability, and other identity lines. And, lastly, diversity of political investment will only be achieved if people begin to open their minds, think critically, and soften their party line long enough to have productive dialogue.

## Examples of Crowdsourcing in the Public Service

### *Politics*

The ActBlue PAC's website<sup>11</sup> allows Democratic Party candidates to fundraise online quickly and easily, with some turnover and referral marketing tools thrown in. For the 2008 campaign one can see John Edwards and Barack Obama floating to the top, but the top 5 donees list also sports an "Al Gore for President Draft Fund" and "Wes Clark for President Draft Fund" – instead of candidates initiating the fundraising campaign and marketing it through their website, MySpace page, speeches et al, interested citizens have taken the fundraising banner for their favorite candidates unto their own shoulders. In case the candidates don't actually run for the presidency the money defaults back to the DNC, but the notion of crowdsourced fundraising should still perk ears, particularly among those who have draft funds – who needs exploratory committees when you have the Internet?

NPR's *On the Media* interviewed Muckraker's<sup>12</sup> Paul Kiel about the site's recent experiment in crowdsourcing: Muckraker asked its readers to parse the 3,000 emails pertaining to Attorneygate, the firing of federal prosecutors that the Department of Justice released publicly . Within hours Muckraker readers were digging up compromising

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<sup>11</sup> ActBlue, <http://www.actblue.com>

<sup>12</sup> Muckraker, <http://www.muckraker.org>

passages, many of which were used in mainstream media reports. This “distributed journalism” might represent a tactic which other organizations could use to analyze declassified documents or to sift through incoming video and audio; it is not unreasonable to think that government agencies could take advantage of it as well.

## ***Crowdsourcing Journalism***

In a piece for *InfoWorld*<sup>13</sup> Paul Roberts details how the first material on the Virginia Tech shootings came from the students themselves, via mobile video, social networking sites, and emails and text messages. CNN and other large news stations used video from mobile phones and threads on Facebook.com. Crowdsourcing reaches into the realm of genuine citizen journalism, beyond simple blogging, and is not limited simply to user-generated content. The terrorist bombings in London experienced the same phenomena, and the Wikipedia article on it often contained news that had not reached the mainstream media. As citizens become a more visible source of information for traditional media outlets the quality of incoming reports will only improve. Accountability, as always, remains an issue.

Wired Magazine’s Assignment Zero<sup>14</sup> experiment has built a platform around collaborative citizen “pro-am” journalism. The site’s users propose ideas for stories, and users can submit research, facts, and article copy – including an entry on crowdsourcing in politics.<sup>15</sup> While still in its infancy the site promises to provide an interesting take on

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<sup>13</sup> “Welcome, citizen journalist”, Paul Roberts, *InfoWorld*, April 02, 2007

<sup>14</sup> Assignment Zero, <http://zero.newassignment.net/>

<sup>15</sup> “Crowdsourcing in Politics,” Assignment Zero, <http://zero.newassignment.net/desk#node-1633>

the 'collective knowledge' issues introduced by Wikipedia and will help formalize the kind of citizen investigation conducted by sites like Muckraker and Porkbusters.org.

### ***Crowdsourcing Law Enforcement***

Law enforcement is arguably one of the most important and most controversial functions of government. The authorities have long turned to the public for help in investigations, from Old West “Wanted, Dead or Alive” posters to Amber Alert missing children notifications to the TV program “America’s Most Wanted,” whose viewer’s tips have led to the capture of 937 fugitives.<sup>16</sup> Programs like anonymous police tip lines and “if you see something, say something” calls-to-action increasingly allow the public to contribute to their own safety, although the dialogue is largely one sided. No information is made available about outstanding tips and alerts, which citizens might be able to vet and take action on; the potential for dangerous vigilantism probably precludes this from ever being a real possibility, although it would certainly help ease the burden of sifting through tips.

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<sup>16</sup> From AMW’s website, <http://www.amw.com/captures/index.cfm>

## Poliwonk: The Legislation Wiki

Legislation is often hidden from the public view through obscurity, a slap in the face to those who call for increased transparency in government. Legislation can be inserted into lengthy. Often highly controversial porkbarrel budgeting or civil liberties infringements Our Poliwonk project<sup>17</sup> aims to develop a platform on which pending legislation is completely transparent and its myriad authors highly accountable. Following the recent ‘Attorneygate’ scandal, in which secret language was inserted into otherwise low-profile legislation (a practice known as log-rolling) – the author of which is unknown -- increased attention has been drawn towards accountability in legislating. Visitors to the Poliwonk website can review, comment on, and available legislation. An emphasis is placed on visually highlighting areas of controversy or partisanship and allowing for per-phrase and per-paragraph comments in a variety of formats, including text, audio, and video, recorded instantly using .

A larger goal is to humanize the language of legislation, which is unwieldy and almost completely inaccessible to the layman. As we attempt to put this kind of content on the web this becomes increasingly important; a website has approximately four seconds to grab someone’s attention before they move on, which calls for a new style of prose and improved summaries. Bloggers have embraced bullet-point culture, favoring short, frequent updates over lengthy monologues. This is not advocating an all-inclusive dumbing-down of legislation simply to make the entire text more palatable for the layperson, but merely an increased recognition of the difference in format & medium and

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<sup>17</sup> Poliwonk, <<http://tramchase.com/wikis/poliwonk>>

the need for an adjustment in the style of prose, particularly regarding the ability to very quickly learn what a specific piece of legislation does, who sponsors it, what the issues and arguments are. A more interested reader may then opt to dive into the full legalese.

Above all, Poliwonk is dedicated to holding government officials accountable for the legislation they've been elected (and paid) to read, deliberate, and vote on, a task which they all too often fail to do. The widespread congressional support for Downsize DC's Read the Bills Act demonstrates Washington's self-recognition of this problem. The recent "who snuck that in there?" Attorneygate scandal and the 'Secret Hold' placed on S.2590<sup>18</sup>, legislation that would create a single website with access to information on nearly all recipients of federal funding, by an anonymous senator continue to illustrate the problem. Senators Stevens and Byrd recently confessed to placing the Hold on S.2590, after which they immediately lifted the hold. Readers of blogs Porkbusters.org and Muckraker conducted extensive contact with almost all 100 senators within 24 hours of the Hold and were arguably critical to the outing of the two Senators.<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that Senator Byrd's office initially denied any claims of involvement.

### ***Current Poliwonk issues***

- Attorneygate,<sup>20</sup> the firing of 8 US attorneys after secret legislation was logrolled into a bill relating to the USA PATRIOT Act. The language granted the executive

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<sup>18</sup> S.2590 on THOMAS: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c109:S.2590>:

<sup>19</sup> "Who is the secret holder?", Porkbusters, <http://porkbusters.org/secrethold.php>

<sup>20</sup> Poliwonk: Attorneygate, <http://tramchase.com/wikis/poliwonk/washington-square-park-environmental-impact-statement>

branch complete freedom in the employment decisions of federal attorneys, a process which previously required Congressional approval. Poliwonk provided a platform for review of the aforementioned legislation, news updates, and general commentary by concerned parties. On March 20, 2007, the Senate voted to overturn this provision by a vote of 94-2. On March 26, the House of Representatives overturned it as well, by a vote of 329-78.

- Washington Square Park redesign<sup>21</sup> -- \$16 million dollars and a gaggle of unhappy community members. Controversial aspects of the proposed plan include the replacement of the park's perimeter fence, the relocation of the central fountain by about 22 feet, and the risk of disturbing the burial ground underneath the park during construction, but the alleged disenfranchisement of local community members in the planning and design process is of greatest concern to many. The constructions potential environmental damage has been an undervoiced issue, and Poliwonk contributor Natalie Jeremijenko has obtained a copy of the Environmental Impact Statement for the construction, a document not currently genuinely available to the public. Poliwonk provides the document (among other regarding the redesign) in the interest of full disclosure and fair argumentation by both sides.

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<sup>21</sup> Poliwonk: Washington Square Park Redesign,  
<http://tramchase.com/wikis/poliwonk/attorney-dismissal-legislation>

## Conclusions

The opportunity to tap into the resources and manpower of a limitless pool of excited, creative, and dedicated group of people is mere clicks away. Politicians and grassroots activists are more and more recognizing the effectiveness of Internet campaigning and are employing increasingly more sophisticated techniques to reach their audience.

Simultaneously the audience themselves are becoming more sophisticated, with more and more individuals and groups contributing to watchdog blogs, wikis, and databases.

Our survey raises concerns about crowdsourced products ability to translate to purchase intent due to issues with the perceived quality of products designed by amateurs.

However, the success of crowdsourcing to date, be it due to increased loyalty, reduced costs, or simply a first-mover advantage, is proving it to be a viable option for developing more responsive and successful business operations. Tapping directly into your support base is (hopefully) every politician and beauracrats dream, which makes crowdsourcing an excellent strategy for improving transparency in government. The need for a broad user base encompassing a distinct variety of identities, skills, and political interests is evident and will likely pose one of the largest problems, particularly with the increasing balkanization of interest groups on the Internet. Embracing direct end-user involvement inherently touches on issues of social justice, democracy, education, and critical dialogue; crowdsourcing may be the laboratory to improve upon all of these things.

The potential for collaboration between politicians and government agencies on one side and private citizens, journalists, and technologists on the other is clear; the precise

methods by which they might achieve it less so. Efforts like Politicopia represent some of the earliest efforts of politicians to more directly tap into their electorates, allowing them to directly voice their opinions on various subjects. The improved principal-agent communication is a win-win situation: voters get representatives in touch with their desires, and representatives get re-elected because they're very representative representatives. Politics becomes more transparent and more accountable, and fear and uncertainty on both sides is reduced. The need to use the Dissidence Toolkit is lessened – but don't think we're going to stop developing it.

## **Appendix: Survey & Results**