

# A Global Advisory Parliament Integrated with the Social Web: Why it Would Improve Legislative Functioning, and How it Could Attain Critical Mass

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## 1 Introduction

As the number of internet-users approaches two billion, politics has been impacted in several ways by the internet. Parties are using ICTs and web-technologies to solicit funding and to better target voters, as in the successful Obama campaign, and a number of MPs now stay in touch with their constituents using e-mail and various web-platforms, such as those provided by mySociety.<sup>73</sup> Also, the government, through what is called e-government, is now harnessing the power of IT to provide better government services.<sup>20</sup> However, the legislative process itself, remains largely untouched by the internet.

This goes contrary to expectations commonly expressed in the 1990's, such as ideas about the internet's supposed intrinsic democratic potential, and treatises about it enabling the introduction of large-scale direct democracies. Some even predicted a watershed change in politics akin to the French Revolution.<sup>14,28,50,75</sup> Nothing of the sort has happened, though with the lower cost of organization online, and the rise of citizen engagement in online one issue-activism, it nevertheless seems plausible that the online public sphere, if properly aggregated, could still play a beneficial role in the legislative process.

In this essay, two related questions will be addressed. First of all, can an online global advisory parliament (henceforth OGAP), improve legislative functioning? In a brief answer it will be argued that it could begin to address some issues of legitimacy that are plaguing modern Western democracies, and that it

could strengthen the online public sphere — what William Dutton has called the Fifth Estate.<sup>32,33</sup>

Second, how can the efficacy and influence of such a parliament be improved? To begin with, three challenges to the success of an OGAP are discussed: First of all, it is hard to change existing institutions, especially in ways that involve web-technology, and therefore the fifth estate should be a civic initiative, with only an advisory function. Secondly, as direct democracy gives little incentive to each voter, another voting system than direct democracy will have to be used. And thirdly, it will be argued that attaining critical mass is the greatest challenge facing an OGAP.

Then transitive delegative democracy is going to be discussed (TDD) as an alternative to direct democracy. It is a hybrid of direct- and representative democracy, which provides incentives to maximize representation, and also combines many of the virtues of both plurality systems and proportional representation. Finally, ways of making critical mass more likely to be attained, are going to be discussed, such as integrating it with Facebook, and thus the social web, and replicating the public agenda, making it relevant for media and politicians. But first some limits of this essay are going to be set out.

### 1.1 Limits

In this paper only an advisory OGAP is proposed. Replacing current democratic institutions will not be argued for. In addition, no autonomous mechanism for agenda-setting will be devised. Instead it will be proposed (one

of the novel contributions of this paper) that the OGAP replicates the agenda of traditional institutions. Secondly, the focus in this paper will be on global-, and to some extent national issues. Its usefulness for local decision making will not be discussed. Also, though important, the digital divide, whether in terms of access, skills, or motivation, and its impact on democratic justice will not be discussed.<sup>72</sup> Neither will issues specific to the 3rd world be discussed, nor the impact of regional cultural differences, for reasons of space.

In addition, theories on the role of deliberation, the origins of political interests (whether private, or based in public discourse), and their impact on legitimacy, will not be delved in too deeply, even though these are contested and important issues.<sup>1,17,27,25,30,100</sup>. Deliberation will only be mentioned where it could be furthered by an OGAP. The focus will be on mechanisms of voting, their democratic legitimacy, and especially their efficacy at attaining critical mass.

It should also be pointed out that this paper is not written from a technological deterministic position. It does not argue that the type of media and form of government, are related.<sup>8</sup> ICTs can both enhance democracy and Orwellian control, and which way things fall is largely a function of collective decisions. Technologies at best provide an environment that affords or limits certain choices. But neither does this paper go to the other extreme of only considering traditional institutions, when looking for changes brought by the internet.<sup>17,72</sup> It will in fact be argued that traditional legislative institutions have mostly been, and likely will be, left untouched.

Finally, this paper will not be discussing security issues with electronic voting, be proposing a specific design for an OGAP, nor will it be about particular web-technologies, (mobile) devices, and their usability aspects, even though such issues are often crucial in the attainment of critical mass.<sup>7,10,59,60,62,81</sup>

## 2 Why it would improve legislative functioning

### 2.1 *Issues of trust and the democratic deficit*

First of all, there are widely felt legitimacy issues with democratic representation in Western democracies. Political scandals figure prominently in the news, and together with a generally reduced respect for elites, politicians involvement with lobbyists, their dependence on private donors, and the professionalization of political communication — not to speak of spin — these, and other factors, have led to a low level of trust in politicians.<sup>12,13,22,28</sup> In 2003 72% of the British public felt disconnected from their MP, for example.<sup>23</sup> Turnout for elections has gone down as well over the last decades, as has loyalty to, and membership of parties.<sup>88</sup>

Another force undermining the legitimacy of national democracies, is globalisation, and a rising number of border-spanning issues. The well known ones are global warming, nuclear threats, infectious diseases, and the depletion of limited resources. Another set relate to international trade, and corporations externalizing costs (such as pollution) upon foreign populations.<sup>71</sup> And of course there is the internet, which also permeates borders, even if extensive filtering is possible.<sup>56</sup> All these make that our collective fates are no longer limited by national borders to the same extent they used to be. Thus even if national public spheres had not become less effective, and were not culturally limited, they would still be less relevant now.<sup>31,49,48,56</sup>

Finally, even where there is international regulation, such as in the WTO, the World Bank, EU, or UN, democratic oversight is absent, or indirect at best.<sup>87,91</sup> Which usually means that people appointed by democratically elected governments are involved in the negotiations. The problem here is that in international negotiations, economic and military might, rather than the size of the worlds pop-

ulation represented by negotiators, determine their influence. This is called the democratic deficit.<sup>14,74</sup> A global OGAP, assuming it attained critical mass (see section 3.2), could fill this gap to some extent, as well as revitalize national politics by strengthening the online public sphere, which will be discussed now.<sup>78</sup>

## 2.2 *Reconnecting politics and the public sphere*

The other reason an OGAP could improve the legislative process, is that it could (re-)connect the political process with the public sphere.<sup>28</sup> The online public sphere, which has been identified as the Fifth Estate, is one of networked individuals, rather than formal organizations. Thanks to the lower costs of communication and organization on the internet, citizens can increase accountability, in what has also been dubbed the monitory democracy by J. Keane.<sup>9,56</sup> But in addition, it allows citizen to go beyond traditional institutions to articulate and aggregate their interests.<sup>17</sup>

Publications on how the internet can harness collective intelligence are several, but in short it comes down to the fact that as a many-to-many-medium, it allows ordinary citizens to collaboratively produce and filter information. Production is seen in Open Source/Content projects such as the Linux OS, the Firefox browser, and Wikipedia.<sup>41,82,47,82</sup> While filtering and aggregation happens most clearly in news-sites, such as Slashdot and Reddit, where ordinary readers function as editors by voting on reader-submitted news-stories.<sup>84</sup> The process that determines whether a story appears on the frontpage is similar in its distributed nature, to that of the market, in which countless individual decisions also determine aggregate-level effects such as the flow of goods. An OGAP could, without going into specifics, filter political ideas and views in a similar way.

While it is true that the success of online platforms is generally determined by a small

core of active participants, this is similarly true for offline political action. And even if limited to an active core, aggregating peoples ideas and views in the public sphere, would be a good idea for two reasons. First of all, it would provide a clear, ongoing focus for deliberation, with every won supporter tallied. Secondly, it would provide a clearer message to politicians about peoples preferences. Currently articulation and aggregation is one of the main roles of political parties, but as noted, trust in parties is declining, and many people have turned their back to politics. However, given that one-issue politics is growing at the same time, this disinterest does not seem to be intrinsic, but rather indicative of problems in communication and representation.<sup>16</sup>

Related to this, there is the notion of a weak, and a strong public sphere. Where a strong public sphere is one in which there is a direct way for citizens to influence policy, while in a weak one there is not (to the same extent), and cynicism dominates.<sup>39,91</sup> As Robert Dahl noted, the current public sphere is weak: He identifies five types of participants in politics: those in office, bureaucrats and lobbyists, informed citizens, habitual voters, and non-participants; and broadcast media allow the first two to influence habitual voters, while removing informed citizens from the equation.<sup>24,90</sup> Or to speak with Coleman noted something similar: broadcast media are very good at making people aware of issues, and maybe at working through them in televised debates, but not at allowing citizens to take part in formulating and choosing resolutions.<sup>22,26</sup> An OGAP could allow citizens to do so, even without any formal powers. More on institutions now.

## 3 **Challenges to such improvements**

### 3.1 *Existing institutions are hard to change*

An OGAP would best be independent and advisory, rather than a formal part of gov-

ernment. There always is a tension between enhancing and going around existing institutions, as institutions are inert, but (often) needed for collective action.<sup>88,93</sup> As A. Strauss has argued, there are four ways in which an (advisory) world parliament could come into being: as an amendment to the UN, but that would require a 2/3rd majority in the council, as a subsidiary of the UN, as is proposed by the UNPA project, through inter-state treaties (as happened regionally in the EU), or as an initiative by civic society.<sup>37,93,94</sup> The first three require significant changes to, or powerful support inside, existing institutions, while the latter does not.

First of all, government is slow to change. In practice significant changes to the legislative process only happened over periods of several decades or even centuries; an eternity compared to the pace of change on the internet.<sup>52,61</sup> In addition, some would also argue that there is a risk in altering the cores of parliaments (and constitutions) that have kept despotism at bay.

Reforming a party, or introducing a new one, might be an alternative. Yet introducing online democratic elements in parties is almost as hard. ICTs are used within them for administrative purposes, for targeting voters and for top-down communication, but rarely for consulting members.<sup>21,50,58,65</sup> Even NGO's rarely do so.<sup>57</sup> Another complication is that in larger parties existing party elites stand to lose.<sup>1</sup> As for new parties, there currently is one: Demoex, a Swedish party which has one seat and mirrors peoples votes in online polls.<sup>77</sup> But as a fringe phenomenon it remains associated with the far left. Finally, introducing a new party stands no chance in states without proportional representation.

Rather than reforming parliament, or injecting online elements through a new party, an OGAP that shadows real parliaments remains the best option. It could offer a gradual route for political innovation, growing on the side, and sending its resolutions as rec-

ommendations to politicians. It would not be the first time that an internet-endeavour went around existing institutions. While generalization has its limits, almost all successful ones have so far: Amazon was not started by a bookstore chain, Google not by a national library, and E-bay not by an auction-house. If anything, the internet, with its lowered costs of organization, could afford an advisory world-parliament to come about as a citizen initiative.<sup>9</sup> However, even an OGAP faces challenges, the biggest of which is attaining critical mass, about which more now.

### 3.2 *Critical mass as the main challenge*

Attaining critical mass for a new web-community is a notoriously hard problem, the crux of which is that if there are no users it is not useful for newly arriving visitors, but unless it is useful, there are going to be no initial users to make it useful. In the current context this means that while few are represented by the OGAP, its recommendations will not have any impact, but until its recommendations have some force, nobody will care to partake in it.<sup>79</sup>

Critical mass has only been studied to a limited extent. In the social sciences it is mostly limited to collective action in protests, giving, and especially free-rider problems, and the extent to which organisation(s) can impact this.<sup>67,68,66</sup> In the context of the economics of adoption, most literature exists on cases in the offline world, such as the introduction of fax-machines.<sup>3,34,101</sup> What those teach us is that difficulties in attaining critical mass come from a lack of network-effects.<sup>54</sup> A phone network is the simplest example of a system that exhibits network-effects: If you were the only person in the world having a phone, it would be completely useless to you (except maybe as a status-object).

There is no agreement on a definition of critical mass. A wide array of definitions exists, such as entering self-sustaining growth, or achieving mainstream adoption.<sup>4,34,40,42</sup>

The simplest conception though, is that of attracting a minimum core group of active users needed to sustain the community. It is analogous to the concept of critical mass in physics: the smallest mass that will sustain a reaction.<sup>35,4</sup> This is the concept that will be mostly used when discussing ways of overcoming the problem for an OGAP in section 5. An important factor in the attainment of critical mass, is whether the incentives are right for people to participate. As will now be argued, direct democracy fails in this respect.

### 3.3 *Direct democracy does not work*

Direct democracy is not suitable for an OGAP. Ever since the nineties, online voting (and before that TV-voting) has been pictured in terms of a direct democracy: everybody votes on everything, following a one (hu)man one vote-principle. An example of a project employing this approach is the American website *vote.com*. On it, a series of yes-no questions are put up every day, which attract a couple of thousand votes. A notable feature of the site is that its results are sent on to politicians, so it is advisory.<sup>12</sup> The *OpenDemocracy.net* and *VirtualParliament.org.uk* sites, are similar projects, and on *MetaGovernment.org* twenty more can be found, none of which very large or active.<sup>76,97,69</sup>

Apart from the lack of success of direct democracy, there are good reasons for representation as Miller, and classical political philosophers such as Hamilton and Madison have clarified: selecting experts (the filtering ideal of representative democracy), and creating room for debate and rational consideration (limiting the influence of mobs).<sup>83</sup> But the biggest is that direct democracy isn't scalable. Not in terms of meeting-size limits, or the cost of tallying the votes, as those restrictions have indeed been lifted, but in terms of incentives.<sup>1,70</sup> Informing oneself, and voting about every issue takes time, and arguably expertise, while in large nations, let alone globally, each vote has such a minute influence on

the outcome, that the rational course of action for most individuals is to spend their time on something else.<sup>44,45</sup> This is called rational ignorance.<sup>38,51</sup> Thus even if a direct democracy were to attain critical mass, it would never be able to attain mainstream adoption.

Several alternatives have been proposed for reshaping the incentives, such as sampling referenda, which select those who can vote as a random sample of the population, and deliberative polling, where the sample, before voting, is asked to debate the issues under consideration.<sup>6,36,38,89</sup> And while there is something to say for these sortition-based models, TDD will be argued for instead, because, besides doing better on incentives, it can provide representation for everyone. More on TDD now.

## 4 **Transitive delegative democracy**

### 4.1 *Providing incentives to vote through delegation*

TDD is a hybrid between direct and representative democracy, that provides better incentives to vote. It was invented by G. Tullock in 1967, and it, and very similar ideas, are also named proxy voting, liquid democracy, and delegable- or delegate cascade democracy.<sup>96,44,84</sup> Its core idea is delegation. That is, citizens can either vote directly, or voluntarily assign their vote to a proxy that will represent them, similar to how this happens in stockholder voting. Also, as in stockholder voting, people can vote by themselves at all times. The selection of a proxy can either be pictured as temporarily passing on ones voting-right, or as automatically copying the proxies vote onto ones own ballot paper. Another important property of TDD, and the one that makes it different, is that delegation is transitive, in the sense that the representative can, in turn, transfer his collected votes on to another proxy, creating a tree or — as not all votes are proxied on — rather a forest (see figure 1).<sup>2,44</sup>

For those passing on their vote, the marginal cost of political participation is

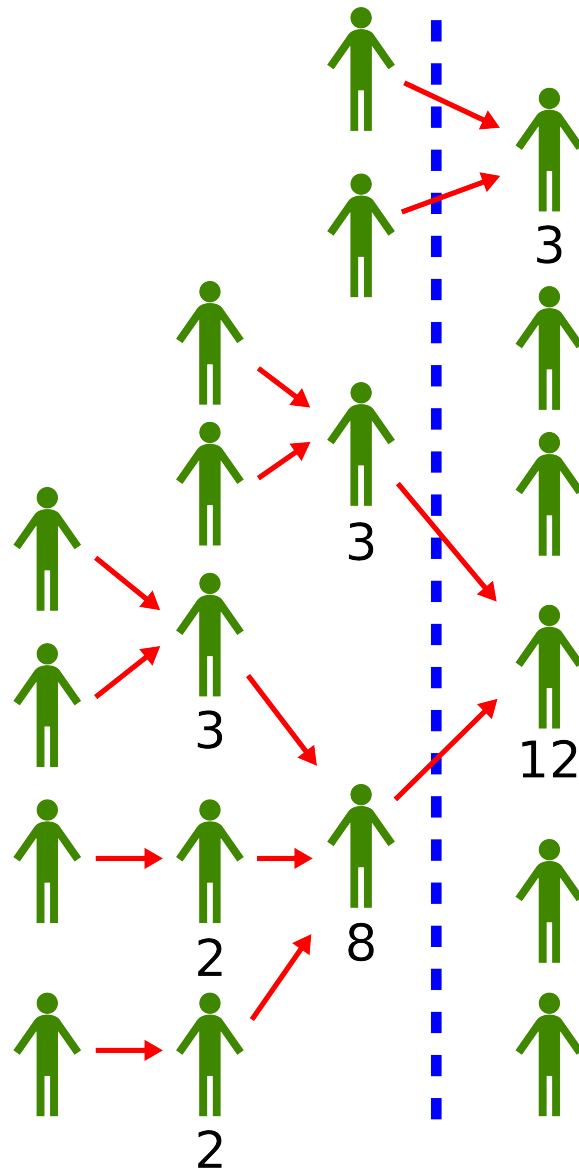


Figure 1: A schematic representation of TDD. People delegating their votes are shown at the left of the blue dotted line (recursively in 5 cases). While those that vote on issues directly are shown to its right (some with higher voting-power, because of collected votes) (image by William Spademan).

lowered even further than by representative democracy with its election-days, as in TDD people only have to (at least once in their lifetime) select a proxy. Also, because of transitivity, citizens first-layer proxies can be people they know personally, rather than distant politicians, thus empowering informed citizens, bloggers, and others. Proxies then can either pass on their votes in turn, or thanks to the votes they collected, will be more incentivised to really consider the issues they vote on.<sup>44</sup> And both greater impact of votes (for proxies) and lower marginal costs to voting (for those selecting proxies), have been shown to increase turnout.<sup>11,51</sup> In political theory, besides the filtering ideal, there is that of representativeness, where representatives should best mirror the general population. By increasing turnout TDD will strengthen this ideal.<sup>38</sup>

However, TDD will also strengthen the filtering ideal, because it does not leave people atomized: (voluntary) filtration starts at a local level, and trickles up along personal relationships of trust. Under these conditions, and assuming current (Western) levels of education, there is little reason to suspect that voters and proxies together will be less stable than politicians. Especially as mob behaviour is rare (at least different) in online collaborative spaces, and might even be limited to physical space.<sup>85,19,36</sup> It is true that the online sphere has occasional flame-wars, which can drive out knowledgeable participants.<sup>17</sup> But flame-wars can be contained by separating the voting system from the deliberative spheres (by allowing it to be embedded in many forums).

At the other extreme there is the risk of elites dominating the system. For example the top 10 political bloggers are all well-educated and male, and the Gini-coefficient (measure of inequality) of traffic to blogs is 0.75 (higher than for incomes anywhere).<sup>50</sup> This is a concern.<sup>46</sup> Though, as long as major sites remain open to user-comments, and caps are put on the number of votes anyone can personally

proxy for (say 1% of the total), there should be little room for dictators.

Another danger that is often mentioned, is that of vote-selling, and/or pressuring people into proxying. Possible guards against this exist however. First of all one could make it impossible to determine whether someone selected somebody else as their proxy, driving the price to zero. Either ensuring privacy of, or allowing for dummy profiles and adding a randomness factor to the number of proxies received, could do this. Secondly, it may be true that proxy-voting works best in environments which, as a whole, are relatively free and equal, as is arguably true for democracy in general. In which case restrictions could be introduced where necessary. Finally, the sale of votes is already illegal in many countries, and strictly enforcing this (online by taking away accounts of buyers) could provide additional protection.

#### 4.2 *Between district-based and proportional systems*

Most democracies in the world use either party-list-based proportionate representation, where seats are allocated according to the percentage of votes received by parties nationwide, or a first past the post, plurality system, with one (or a few) seats per electoral district. An advantage of proportionality is that every citizen is represented, and that there is less need for strategic voting. The main advantage of district-systems is that citizens are personally represented by a specific representative.<sup>61</sup> TDD combines these advantages, by offering proportional representation, while enabling an even more direct connection between voters and their representative.<sup>1</sup>

In TDD there are no districts, and representatives can be close to voters in other ways than simply spatially.<sup>70</sup> Even if sparsely distributed in space, environmentalists, or religious minorities, for example, can now be represented.<sup>15</sup> Also, not having districts, rules out gerrymandering.<sup>1</sup> And the shape, size, and

population-density of electoral districts, together with lost votes, is a serious issue. In district systems up to half the votes are lost, and if there are more than two candidates, lost votes can go well over 60%.<sup>70</sup> More specifically, in the US, fifty one out of a hundred senators represent only 16% of the population.<sup>88</sup> Safe seats are another problem, with certain districts being held by the same representative for 20 years, or the same party for 50 years. This not only limits incentives for good governance, but also leaves sizeable groups in the district without hope of representation.

Another advantage of TDD (especially in an online, advisory setting) is that it could reduce the role of parties, and overcome the bundling of candidates and ideas.<sup>70</sup> Of the four main roles parties play, the first two could be provided in other ways, and the latter two would be less relevant: Leadership recruitment could happen from the local/personal level 1), ideas could be articulated by the public and be aggregated by voting 2). While 3) national points of reference would become less crucial, given local proxying, and could also be provided by NGO's (if they would be allowed to act as proxies), and the final 4); direction to government, would not apply in an online advisory setting. Also, by reducing the roles of parties, strong swings of policy common in two-party states are prevented. Finally, as for the risk fringe-interests taking over, in an OGAP one would still need a majority to pass recommendations. And without parties and permanent coalitions and the deals that come with them, fringe-interests would be unlikely to gain disproportionate leverage as tie-breakers.<sup>44</sup>

The main remaining issue for TDD-based OGAPs, even though they maximize the incentives, is non-participation. Two projects currently exist. The first is the World Parliament Experiment. It aims to be a role-model for a world-parliament, and strives for a united, democratic world. It was set up by former Harvard student Rasmus Tenber-

gen. A novel feature of the site is that the votes of people that neither vote directly, nor select a proxy, will be randomly assigned to proxies.<sup>93,95</sup> Another project, or rather set of projects, is *Liqd.net*, ran by a German group. They develop two Free Software TDD voting applications: Adhocracy (web-based), and Votorola (peer to peer).<sup>2,99</sup> They host Adhocracy for a few dozen organisations and clubs. Among these are Die Linke, a German left-wing party, and the Munich city council, which uses an instance to gather ideas for online government services. Yet none has more than a thousand signups, or is very active, and thus they do not have critical mass. Two ways for enhancing their chance of attaining critical mass will be discussed now.

## 5 Attaining critical mass

### 5.1 Integration with a social network

The first way in which an OGAP could be made more likely to attain critical mass, is integrating it with a social network, and thus with the social web.<sup>84</sup> Integration with existing platforms is crucial, as it lowers hurdles and builds trust.<sup>80,98</sup> An additional benefit of integration with a social networking site, is that it makes it easier for people to select a proxy from among their friends.<sup>15</sup> For two reasons Facebook would be the natural choice. First of all, it has more than 500 million users, and thus provides a large existing network to traverse. Secondly, Facebook allows third parties to develop applications on top of it, and thus enables such integration in a practical sense.

Integration with Facebook would also make an OGAP more visible. When somebody joins the OGAP, this would be shown on their profile (and possibly be broadcast in their news feed), thus introducing virality. A further way to increase virality, would be to automatically make people represent all their Facebook friends in the OGAP, unless those friends sign up as well, and choose a different



proxy (or were already represented by somebody who joined earlier). Other ways of providing virality, such as providing badges for on peoples blog, or homepage (showing the number of people they represent, or the most recent vote) should also still be employed.

Some people would argue that a commercial site such as Facebook should not be used as a platform/substrate for something of (potential) political importance. There are two answers to this. First of all, Facebook might be used as scaffolding, where the OGAP would also offer normal (non-Facebook based) accounts, so that once critical mass is attained, it can stand on its own. A second way, would be to use Facebook as an initial domain to work in.<sup>15</sup> There might be leverage for this as considerable numbers of people are worried about Facebook's policies, for example on privacy. This as Facebook has access to more private information than most large states. In 2009 there was a vote on Facebook's new privacy policy, and even though only 0.03% of users voted, this still added up to 600,000 people.

Another good way to attain initial traction is to make the site/service useful to the individual before critical mass is attained.<sup>86,101</sup> One way to do this, is to present it as a means for expressing individual political preferences on ones blog. At least in the offline world, self-expression was found to be an important motivator for political action.<sup>55</sup> In addition, the OGAP might initially be set up as a permanent proxy-network that makes it easier for people to support petitions (for example all those by a certain NGO). This would help it gain exposure.

Finally, there might be an issue with people being afraid to express their political opinions in sight of their friends (and co-workers or supervisor). Fear of consequences could lead to a spiral of silence. Political activism being futile, and apathy being the group norm, were also identified in studies as reasons for political apathy. These things are potential prob-

lems. But there are two routes around them: The first is starting out with relatively uncontroversial recommendations, such as supporting human rights, and fundamental freedoms. The second is that the spiral of silence might be unwound when people start to see that their friends have political opinions as well.<sup>20</sup> This should not be impossible, as the appropriateness of discussing political topics has differed throughout history, and still does between cultures.

## 5.2 *Replicating the public agenda*

Then for the second way, if an OGAP as an 'institution' is to be successful, it not only needs to be embedded in the social web, but also has to interact well with the institutions of government.<sup>12,16</sup> The authors of the Federalist Papers already noted that the interaction between institutions is an important part of their design. And a way to drastically improve such interaction for an OGAP, is to have it replicate the agenda, and possibly the bills under vote, of one or more influential national/regional parliaments (and global summits, where relevant).

It might seem attractive for the Fifth Estate to be able to set its own agenda.<sup>5</sup> Agenda-setting, after all, is an important right in any democratic system, and there seems little legitimacy in letting national parliaments set the agenda for a global advisory OGAP. Yet replicating existing agendas brings two benefits. The first is that it keeps the OGAP in sync with political blogs and news reporting, both online and in traditional media. Thus making it easy for such channels to embed a voting widget, or to cover/discuss recommendations by the OGAP. Secondly, it makes sure that recommendations made by the OGAP can provide a voice for the Fifth Estate that is well-timed to be taken into account by the relevant decision makers.

Another choice that can help or hamper the attainment of critical mass, is which audience a project goes for first. Generally, starting out

with the most willing contributors was found to be a good strategy. Which suggests picking activists as a starting audience. Not only are they more politically interested, and active, but they are also likely to be socially connected to other activists, thus harnessing local network effects (a similar mechanism that makes pioneers more likely to want to call other pioneers).<sup>92</sup> Yet this should be done in moderation, as TDDs unique strength lies with allowing people with varying levels of motivation, and (time) resources, to become proxies, or select them, and be represented in either case.

Other approachable groups might be those near the political fringes, such as (far) left- and right-wing groups, as well as certain minorities. Not only might they welcome an outlet (especially in district-systems), but their disagreements might also raise the stakes and spice up the debates. Especially as, contrary to offline settings, it was found that in the online sphere disagreement furthers debate, and triggers responses, rather than inhibiting them.<sup>18,43</sup> Naturally, one would have to invite such groups in moderation, as having them as a (temporary) majority or being identified with them, could hurt adoption. Though, sticking to existing agendas should provide some protection against this, by limiting the votes to mainstream issues.

Another important factor in critical mass, are user rewards. Allowing self-expression through the application was already discussed, but more can be done. Giving roles recognizable names, such as calling proxies representatives, can help people relate to them. A thing to keep in mind here is not to get too high-brow, as one of the reasons Wikipedia gained initial traction, for example, was that it was presented as a drafting platform for an online encyclopedia that would function along more traditional lines.<sup>29</sup> Reasoning on from this, the OGAP could even be presented as something educational, as a simulation similar to World Model United Na-

tions, or even as a game (allowing people to match political preferences against those of friends).<sup>12</sup> It could then target youth, or students (who are also more likely to be familiar with, and heavy users of the internet).<sup>53,64,63</sup> The choice between these frames would depend on the situation, but in any case, how things are presented and explained, is very important, as it accounts for up to 2/3rd of peoples feelings towards a site.<sup>22</sup>

Another way to use of rewards would be to incentivise early joiners with a larger stake of unclaimed votes to represent, say a percentage of their home counties inhabitants (or their friends on Facebook). This might be necessary because, as noted, the incentives for joining the OGAP are small before it has any impact.<sup>92</sup> Even in the offline world, elections of less powerful bodies have lower turnout.<sup>11</sup> A thing to keep in mind related to impact, however, is that in terms of user-decisions, critical mass initially depends on perception. Which, when enough users think there is (or will be) critical mass, might make it work like a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>3</sup> Experiments have at least shown that, in online petitions, information on the number of supporters affects decisions positively, but only if there are over a million.<sup>66</sup> It might thus be better not to prominently show user-numbers until such figures have been reached.

## 6 Conclusion

To conclude, it has been argued that low levels of trust in politicians as well as the democratic deficit, leave room for improving legislative functioning. An OGAP aggregating the Fifth Estate, could re-connect politics to the global public sphere, by offering a focal point for the debate. And as existing institutions are best kept in place, an OGAP should only have advisory powers. The biggest challenge to the efficacy and influence of an OGAP, is attaining critical mass. TDD can help with this, as it creates the right incentives for people to vote. And at the same time, it combines the advan-

tages of district- and proportional systems, in terms of maintaining a personal connection between the voters and their representative.

However, TDDs incentive structure is not enough by itself to attain critical mass, and therefore two further ways of bringing it closer were discussed. First of all integrating an OGAP with an online social network should firmly embed it in the social web, and provide exposure and virality. Secondly, rather than it setting its own agenda, having the OGAP replicate the agenda of national parliaments would increase the relevance of its recommendations to both news-media, and politicians.

Whether these proposals can make the difference, is hard to say. Critical mass requires more than building and managing the right web-application. A measure of luck and good timing might be necessary as well.<sup>72</sup> Yet one thing is clear: Without critical mass, an OGAP will never be effective and influential. Other design-, legitimacy- and procedural issues are important, but they will not make or break it. Ultimately only the people will decide whether an OGAP comes to be.

And as democratic revolutions cascade through the Middle East, brought about by humanitarian and political injustice, high food prices, and accelerated by the communicative capabilities of the internet, we cannot, but keep alive hopes of democratic regeneration. Not only in the Middle East, Africa, and China, but also in the heartlands of democracy, where it all began, not once in Athens, nor twice, in Florence and the US, but several times throughout history.

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