

**Cyberdemocracy v. Egovernment:
The Degree of Interactivity on State Legislative Websites**

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Abstract

The concept of cyberdemocracy emphasizes the ability of the interactive nature of websites to boost participation in politics and civic affairs. That potential, however, is clouded by imprecise definitions of interactivity found among scholars and practitioners alike. Government websites may be alternatively characterized as egovernment, where the Internet is used to provide information and other government services. The websites of the 50 state legislatures were evaluated in regard to their degree of interactivity, and ability to promote interaction. Overall, the sites were found to be more in the nature of egovernment than cyberdemocracy. They provide a useful medium for the transfer of information and citizen-legislator communication, but not a place of public discourse.

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The Internet and its websites are yet another stage in the long-standing relationship between technology and democracy. The introduction of various technologies such as radio, television, cable TV and computers has been accompanied by predictions that they will change the nature of democracy. While not everyone has viewed such change as positive, technology has often been seen as a vehicle for the improvement of democracy, particularly through its encouragement of public participation.

Even prior to the development of the Internet, the computer was hailed for its ability to provide information needed by the public to participate in their own governing (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1985.) The innovation of computer-mediated communications (CMC) such as the World Wide Web and email are further seen as creating opportunities for average citizens to interact with decision makers, thus supplanting current government structures with a more direct participatory experience (Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth, & Toffler, 1994). The Internet's alleged potential to transform democracy is perhaps best expressed in *The Electronic Republic* (1995) where Lawrence Grossman predicts that ordinary citizens "By pushing a button, typing on-line, or talking to a computer, ...will be able to tell their president, senators, members of Congress, and local leaders what they want them to do and in what priority order" (p. 149).

The potential of technology to revolutionize politics, participation, and civic life is seriously disputed. One view holds that the practical effect of much communication technology has been an erosion of the quality of civic discourse. Television news is seen as superficial, talk radio as the arena of the ill-informed yahoos, mass-mailed emails as a poor excuse for citizen input, and chat rooms as a place where writers hide behind pseudonyms as they "flame" each other and refuse to use capitalization.

Turning to more objective analyses, Bruce Bimber (1998) finds no empirical relationship between increased communication/information and political engagement, and argues that the Internet will cause "accelerated pluralism," altering the structure of political power but not leading to a new era of democracy. On the same theme, Richard Davis (1999) finds that a succession of twentieth century communication technologies, including radio and television, did not truly upset power structures or cause breakthroughs in public participation. Davis acknowledges that the Internet has changed the shape of political processes and institutions, but also observes that traditional political actors are adapting to it. He concludes that the players who have previously dominated mass media will also dominate the Internet.

The ultimate impact of the Internet on politics is open to question, but there is no denying that it has become a significant presence in civic life. The Pew Internet & American Life Project (Madden, 2003) reported that government Websites now are visited by 12 million Americans on a typical day. The Websites under investigation in this paper, state legislature sites, collectively receive over 1.5 million unique visits a week when the legislatures are in session (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2003a). Such mass behavior conclusively demonstrates that the Internet is not some esoteric activity favored by a few computer geeks.

Various terms are used to describe the civic application of the Internet, ranging from digital democracy, to egovernment, to cyberdemocracy. While sometimes used as if interchangeable, the terms do not mean the same things to all people. Advocates of cyberdemocracy place considerable emphasis on the interactive nature of websites, arguing that government sites should be more than electronic bulletin boards which simply provide information.

Egovernment may be a better characterization of current government sites than cyberdemocracy. As defined by Edmiston, "In the simplest of terms, e-government is electronic government, or the use of digital technology in the management and delivery of public services, predominantly through the Internet" (2003, p. 20).

Government websites have allowed citizens to substitute emails for letters, and to engage in a number of transactions, such as the purchase of documents and processing of licenses. But while many people may appreciate the ability to renew their car registration online, especially when compared to memories of standing in long lines at the Department of Motor Vehicles, such activity seems to fall short of cyberdemocracy.

Proponents of cyberdemocracy maintain that website design should encourage interaction with government officials and provide opportunities to provide input into the decision-making process. But as we shall see, this appealing goal is complicated by differing definitions of interactivity, as well as a distinction between interactivity and interaction. It is possible to promote interaction, both on and offline, without being interactive.

The Many Definitions of Interactivity

An understanding of interactivity in the context of websites should be grounded in the history of the term, which is older and broader than the Internet. Attempts to arrive at a precise definition are frustrated, however, by the variety of meanings from various perspectives, including communications, technology, and psychology.

Interactivity is defined by some scholars in terms of being a property of the communication process rather than a specific medium. Ha and James (1998) define

interactivity "... in terms of the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate, each other's communications needs" (p. 461). Rafaeli (1988) defines interactivity as "... an expression of the extent that, in a given series of communications exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions" (p. 111).

Bretz (1983) and Rice (1984) implicitly assume that two-way communication is more interactive than one-way communication. Pavlik (1998) sees interactivity as "... two-way communication between source and receiver, or, more broadly multidirectional communication between any number of sources and receivers" (p. 137). Haeckel (1998, p. 63) describes "the essence of interactivity" as an "exchange." The two-way exchange is present in other definitions, and found in both synchronous and asynchronous contexts.

The ability of users to modify the two-way exchange is an example of interactivity that seems particularly relevant to websites. "In interactive systems, a customer controls the content of the interaction requesting or giving information.... The hallmark of these new media is their interactivity - the consumer and the manufacturer enter into dialogue in a way not previously possible" (Bezjian-Avery, Calder, & Iacobucci, 1998, p. 23). For Steuer (1992) "Interactivity is the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time" (p. 84). Lombard and Snyder-Dutch (2001) "define interactivity as a characteristic of a medium in which the user can influence the form and/or content of the mediated presentation or experience." Straubhaar and LaRose (1996) "use the term

interactive to refer to situations where real-time feedback is collected from the receivers of a communications channel and is used by the source to continually modify the message as it is being delivered to the receiver" (p. 12). Did someone say "cookies?"

The definition of interactivity can also be technology-based through a focus on the features or characteristics of a particular medium. According to Carey (1989) interactive media are "... technologies that provide person-to-person communications mediated by a telecommunications channel (e.g. a telephone call) and person-to-machine interactions that simulate interpersonal exchange (e.g. an electronic banking transaction)" (p. 328). McMillan (2000) identified 13 features that, based on literature about interactivity, might suggest that a website is interactive. Some of the features included were email links, registration forms, survey/comment forms, chat rooms, and search engines.

Interactivity as perceived by the user applies a psychological orientation to the concept. According to Schumann, Artis, and Rivera (2001) "Ultimately it is the consumer's choice to interact, thus interactivity is a characteristic of the consumer, and not a characteristic of the medium. The medium simply serves to facilitate the interaction." For Kiousis (1999), interactivity "... refers to the ability of users to perceive the experience to be a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence" (p. 18). Newhagen, Cordes, and Levy (1996) conceptualize interactivity based on "... the psychological sense message senders have of their own and the receivers' interactivity" (p. 165).

The definition of interactivity is broadened further by those who see it as a combination of process, features and/or perception. Heeter (1989) argues that interactivity is a multi-

dimensional concept based in the functions of the medium that includes complexity of choice available, effort users must exert, responsiveness to the user, monitoring information usage, ease of adding information, and facilitation of interpersonal communication.

From the definitions above it is easy to see the relationship between websites and interactivity. The concept of communication as a sequence of two-way exchanges, the ability of the user to modify the exchange, and the use of feedback by the source to modify the message can be seen clearly in the operation of websites. But not everything on a website is interactive. Some observers have even found the association of the Internet and interactivity to be blown out of proportion, such as McGovern (2002) when he writes:

Interactivity has become an almost sacred tenet of the Internet. Again and again, we are told that interactivity is what makes the Internet really different. However, interactivity on the Internet is often vastly over-hyped... If you turn a page in a magazine or book, that doesn't exactly qualify as interactivity. Yet, if you click a link on the Web, many feel you are participating in an interactive activity.

If interactivity is lacking when one makes a selection from a table of contents and turns to the page where an article begins, it follows that changing the channel on a television set is also not interactive. The key missing element is that the user is simply selecting an option, as opposed to individually modifying an exchange. Every user that selects, say, Channel 9 gets the same program. Further modification by the users, such as changing the volume, are minimal and do not alter the signal as sent by the source. Along the same lines, current website architecture includes a lot of non-interactive choices. Clicking on a link is, in many cases, not unlike choosing a channel. Every user who makes that selection receives identical content.

Evaluation of Interactivity in Governments

Contemporary government websites have been faulted for not promoting more interaction. Darrell West's e-government project evaluated 1680 state and federal Websites between the summers of 2000 and 2001. Under the evaluation category of "Democratic Outreach," features checked included email, search, comments, email updates, broadcast, and personalization. Democratic outreach with its ability to bring citizens closer to their governments was described as one of the most promising aspects of e-government. The analysis found, however, that many government sites had not taken full advantage of this technology, and concluded that "Government websites tend to offer more basic information than features that make their websites interactive" (2001, p. 10.)

Another study of a large number of governmental sites is The Congress Online Project, which performed a comprehensive evaluation of all 605 congressional member office, committee, and leadership Websites. Their evaluation found that only 10 percent of the evaluated sites merited grades of A or B (<http://www.congressonlineproject.org/pfcongressonline2002.html>). Their evaluative criteria, developed in part through focus groups of citizens, included interactivity, defined as a site offering its visitors opportunities to express their views, and fostering on and off-line communication. Specific features described as interactive included subscriptions to email updates/newsletters, online surveys and polls, bulletin boards and chat rooms, feedback and comment forms, "Write Your Representative" (zip code-based mail service), public email addresses, and staff contact information.

Interactivity was also a key component of the Website attribute evaluation system (WAES) developed by The Cyberspace Policy Research Group (<http://www.cyprg.arizona.edu/waes.html>). In this case, interactivity was defined broadly as "... the ease with which visitors can use information provided on the website." The study's criteria for the evaluation of interactivity included privacy issues such as the use of "cookies," evidence that the organization wished to receive input such as provision of email addresses, links to subdivisions within the organization, e-subscriptions to newsletters, links to issue-oriented information, presence of downloadable forms, content in languages other than the principal one of the country, and provisions for access by people with disabilities.

Each of the three studies above provides a definition of website interactivity, along with examples of features that make sites so. Several features, including email and subscriptions, are common to all three studies, but each study also includes idiosyncratic features, such as West's search engines, Congress On-line's chat rooms, and CYPRG's downloadable forms. The issue of cookies does not even involve any action on the part of users. Perhaps the absence of cookies may make users more comfortable in regard to privacy, and more likely to visit the site. It could also be argued, however, that the presence of cookies promotes interactivity, by allowing personalization of the site.

All three studies share a feature-based definition of interactivity, albeit focused on somewhat different site attributes. The feature-based approach has limitations but is clearly a practical choice as compared to other alternatives. A psychological approach involving user perceptions would require a survey of users, who would have to be

identified and surveyed from a sample. Definitions based on the communication process itself, while appealing in theory, are difficult to operationalize, more qualitative, and carry serious reliability concerns. A features-based evaluation is straightforward and poses reliability issues that are relatively easy to address.

Interactivity as Seen by Legislative Information Technology Professionals

The opinions and definitions of interactivity of scholars and website reviewers can be contrasted to that of info tech professionals responsible for the design and maintenance of these sites. A survey of the chief technology officer (CTO) for each legislature was conducted in 2003 (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2003a). Interactivity was not viewed by CTOs as the highest contributor to the quality of their site, as compared to other attributes, as they rank ordered their priorities as follows: content; usability, ability to serve different types of audiences, interactivity, and transparency.

In an open-ended question the CTOs were asked to list features on their sites that promoted interactivity. The question intentionally avoided a precise definition of interactivity, so as to see how the officers would define it in terms of features mentioned. They were also asked to identify features they would like to add, so as to make their sites more interactive. The responses are presented in Table 1.

The list of features cited by CTOs as interactive is quite diverse, and includes many items that seem to be more of the nature of the information dissemination, as opposed to an interactive, two-way exchange. The provision of audio and video feeds from committee and/or floor sessions, however desirable, falls outside of much of the definitions of interactivity. Virtually absent from the lists, and as we shall see, absent

from the sites themselves, were means for citizens to express opinions, aside from email, such as online surveys or public forums.

The diversity of features cited and the questionable interactive nature of some suggest that the CTO's definition of interactivity is wide-ranging and fairly inconsistent. A similar conclusion can be drawn from other open-ended comments provided by some CTOs. Several of the officers flat-out observed that their sites were not very interactive. Others described interactivity as the essence of their Website, such as the CTO who said:

The entire site promotes *interactivity* - from the contact information to automated databases (find your legislator, boards and commissions search, audio and video of proceeding/meetings, access for those with disabilities, constitution, terms used by the legislature). If one of my primary goals for this site was not to promote *interaction* with the legislature, then this data would be simply useless information just put on the site to fill up space. (Italics added for emphasis.)

These remarks by this info tech officer illustrate how easy it is to slip between the concepts of interactivity and interaction. Note that both terms are found in this quotation in what would appear to be synonymous usage. But the distinction between the two is hardly trivial. Interaction is more appropriately applied to communication between people. Interactivity is more a property of the medium.

It is quite possible for websites to have non-interactive features that promote interaction. For instance, the provision of fax numbers or toll-free numbers to reach legislators facilitates the contacting of them through means other than the Internet. Furthermore, if one broadens the goal of a legislative website from interaction to civic engagement, it is possible to see many aspects, some interactive, and some not, that would promote awareness, interest, and informed public opinion.

Table 1: Website Features Cited as Interactive by CTOs

Feature	Current Feature	Future Feature
Member email links	14	
Bill status and tracking	13	7
Streaming video/audio	10	1
Member bios	8	
Site support/Webmaster email	6	
Feedback/contact forms	6	3
Calendars	6	
Who's my legislator	4	1
Search engines	3	2
ESubscription service	3	2
Databases/infobases	2	1
Customized bill lists	2	
Floor proceedings	2	
Kids/student pages	2	3
On-line requests for reports	2	
Revised code	2	
Lobbyist in a Box	1	
Email newsletters	1	
Personal layouts	1	
Print baskets	1	
File cabinet	1	
Dynamic error messages	1	
Gift shop on line	1	
Roll calls	1	2
Downloads	1	
Journals	1	
Bill history	1	
On-line registration for budget hearings	1	
Full bill text	1	
Tutorials	1	
No cookies	1	
Chamber automation	1	
PDA and Cell phone bill notification	1	2
Redistricting Info	1	
Opinion poll	1	1
Very little	1	
Bill drafts and comment sheets		1
Committee reports and data acquisition		1
Instant messaging		1
Contact service		1
Disability access certification		1
Create own reports		1

Assessment of State Legislative Websites In Regard to Interactivity and Interaction

An evaluation of the 50 state legislative websites was conducted in the summer of 2004 to determine the degree to which interactive features were present. The sites were further evaluated as to the degree to which they foster online as well as offline interaction. Two scales were constructed to measure these concepts. (See Appendix A for a listing of all features evaluated in this report.)

Interactive features were defined as those that reflected a two-way exchange between the user and site, including the ability of the user to modify the exchange. Interactivity was also seen in circumstances where subsequent visits reflected activities in earlier sessions, and especially where sites provided information uniquely responding to the requests of individuals. Several features found on many sites were considered interactive only when they met the criteria above. Aids to navigation were interactive if they included aspects such as online help. Virtual tours were considered interactive if they allowed the user to control the camera angle or move through the image. Educational materials, especially for children, were considered interactive if they included puzzles, games or quizzes that allowed users to engage in the activity and receive individualized responses, usually scores and indication of the correct answers. Many sites included aids to navigation, tours, and educational material that were not interactive. We noted that a number of sites claiming to have "virtual tours" offered only a series of static pictures.

Features that always met our interactivity criteria included public forums; active email to legislators; active email to webmasters or other technical personnel; site search

engines; personalized site layouts; esubscriptions to committee hearing notification or bill tracking; and options to determine "Who's My Legislator" by entering zip codes or other individual information or clicking on a map. Online polls were counted as an interactive feature if they were generally available on the site, as opposed to options on isolated member pages. The features described in this and the preceding paragraph were the basis of our "Interactivity Rating" for each state. Certain other features having some element of interactivity were excluded from our rating. Online giftshops, for instance, do encompass a two-way exchange. We were unable to figure out, however, what this exchange had to do with democracy.

Turning to the concept of interaction, we assessed sites for their ability to promote it, both on and offline. This rating included the presence of public forums, online polling, email to legislators (active or simply a listing), active email to webmasters or other technical staff, "Who's My Legislator" features, provision of fax numbers, toll-free numbers either to an information hotline and/or to legislators, ability to register online to testify at committee hearings, and to submit testimony online. This list of features formed our "Interaction Rating." Other features, such as regular phone numbers and U.S. Mail addresses promote interaction, but are found on virtually all the sites, thus having no variation.

Evaluation of State Legislature Websites

A total of 51 state legislature websites were evaluated using the URLs obtained from the website of the National Conference of State Legislatures. New York remains the only state without a comprehensive site for its state legislature, and thus its

Assembly and Senate sites were evaluated separately. A combined score for New York reflected features found on one or both of the sites. This was consistent with the practice followed in other states, where the state received credit for a feature, say fax numbers for members, found in one chamber but not the other. Credit for fax numbers and email were also awarded in states where somewhat less than 100% of legislators listed such information, as long as it was common to find such listings.

Each site was evaluated by the three members of the research team, who then met to reconcile their findings and verify that all three found the same features. There were occasional disputes as to whether particular features met the evaluation criteria. Our focus was not on the quality of the features but on their presence or absence. While this obviously reduced the problem of subjective judgments, it also fails to account for the quality or usefulness of the features. A liability of this approach is that a site with a poor, albeit interactive, children's game received the same credit for interactivity as did a state with an obviously superior interactive exercise for kids.

Results

Interactivity on Legislative Websites

The presence of interactive features is shown in Table 2. Email to legislators and webmasters was available on almost all sites, and most sites had some variation of "Who's My Legislator." Esubscriptions are now found in over half of the states. Site search engines were found in only 13 states, although many others had search engines of other types, such as for bill content. (Twenty-seven states had site maps, and while not interactive, were often quite useful.) Michigan's site was the most personalized, where users could redesign the site layout. Two other states featured personalized bill

lists. Only three states had sitewide polls, and none had public forums. The states' position on the Interactivity Ranking is shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Interactive Features Found on Legislative Sites

	Frequency
Active email to legislators and/or contact forms	46
Active email and/or contact forms to webmaster or other technical staff	47
"Who's My Legislator" function	43
Esubscriptions to bill tracking or committee schedules	31
Site search engine	13
Virtual Tours	14
Interactive educational material	12
Interactive aids to navigation (online help)	2
Personalized site layouts	3
Online Polling	3
Public Forums	0

Table 3: Interactivity Rating of State Legislature Websites

State	Score	State	Score
Virginia	7	Arkansas	4
Louisiana	7	Kentucky	4
Utah	7	Wyoming	4
Washington	7	Illinois	4
Nevada	6	Oklahoma	4
Wisconsin	6	New Mexico	4
Florida	6	Iowa	3
Minnesota	6	Arizona	3
Texas	6	Tennessee	3
Indiana	6	Oregon	3
New Jersey	6	North Dakota	3
South Dakota	6	Colorado	3
Pennsylvania	6	New Hampshire	3
Connecticut	5	Vermont	3
California	5	West Virginia	3
Hawaii	5	Idaho	3
Maryland	5	Massachusetts	3
Kansas	5	Missouri	3
Michigan	5	Rhode Island	3
New York	5	Delaware	3
South Carolina	5	Alaska	2
Ohio	4	Alabama	2
North Carolina	4	Georgia	2
Maine	4	Montana	2
Nebraska	4	Mississippi	1

Interaction and Legislative Websites

A site's ability to promote off and online interaction was assessed by checking for the features shown in Table 4. Incorporating online features, such as email, from the interactivity rating above, the Interaction Rating adds information such as fax numbers and toll-free numbers, where the website facilitates offline communication.

Table 4: Interaction Promoted by Legislative Websites

	Frequency
Email to legislators	48
Active email to webmaster or other technical staff	47
"Who's My Legislator" functions	43
Fax numbers for legislators	37
Toll-free phone numbers to legislative functions and/or legislators	22
Online Polling	3
Submit committee hearing testimony online	2
Register online for committee hearing testimony	1
Public Forums	0

Table 5 presents the rankings of the states based on the interaction score. Given a number of common components, the Interactivity and Interaction Rankings are not dramatically different. The position of some states, such as Alaska and Utah, varies considerably.

Table 5: Interaction Ranking of State Legislature Websites

State	Score	State	Score
Nevada	8	Missouri	5
Virginia	7	New Hampshire	5
Florida	7	Oregon	5
Wisconsin	7	Tennessee	5
Arizona	7	Alaska	5
Louisiana	6	Indiana	4
Washington	6	Michigan	4
Hawaii	6	Minnesota	4
Connecticut	6	Texas	4
Kentucky	6	New York	4
Maine	6	North Carolina	4
Ohio	6	Oklahoma	4
Wyoming	6	Kansas	4
South Dakota	5	Colorado	4
Utah	5	Massachusetts	4
New Jersey	5	Rhode Island	4
Pennsylvania	5	Vermont	4
California	5	Alabama	4
Maryland	5	Mississippi	4
Illinois	5	New Mexico	3
Nebraska	5	West Virginia	3
Arkansas	5	Georgia	3
North Dakota	5	Montana	3
Idaho	5	South Carolina	3
Iowa	5	Delaware	2

Interactivity, Interaction and Website Use

A website's degree of interactivity and ability to promote interaction were both related to its volume of use, but interaction had the much stronger correlation. Our measure of use was "unique visitor count," as obtained in our survey of CTOs in 2003 (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2003a). To account for differing state population sizes, the figure was transformed to unique visitors per thousand. Correlations are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Website Use and Interactivity and Interaction Ratings

Website Use	Pearson's r	Significance
Interactivity Rating	.13	.49
Interaction Rating	.36	.04
N = 32		

The sites' Interactivity Rating is only weakly related to site use. The relationship is not statistically significant, although one might wish to discount the importance of that measure, given that this is a population as opposed to a sample. The Interaction Rating is much more strongly related to site use. The prediction of cyberadvocates that the interactive nature of the Internet will boost civic participation receives rather tepid support from this analysis. To be fair, the Interaction Rating includes some interactive site features, such as email. But it also includes some rather mundane and non-interactive aspects such as fax numbers.

Discussion

The evaluation of state legislative websites as of 2004 has revealed that they provide e-government rather than promote cyberdemocracy. Aside from provisions for the sending of email, the sites lack the kind of civic discussion, such as forums and polls, that advocates of cyberdemocracy seem to want. Although they facilitate the transfer of information and citizen-legislator communication, they cannot be said to provide a means for public discourse.

In regard to interactive features, the sites are more alike than not. Almost all of them have provisions for email and determining the identity of one's legislator, and almost all of them fail to provide polls or public forums. Most have a means to locate content on the site, although more use the non-interactive feature of site maps than the 13 that have site search engines.

While it is true that the state legislature websites seem to have centered on a fairly common set of interactive features, the quality and usefulness of the features varies considerably. While not part of the formal evaluation of this study, a variation in quality of the interactive features was nonetheless obvious, and it was not at all clear whether the degree of interactivity had much to do with overall site quality.

These websites have generally not become more interactive over the past couple of years since we last evaluated them in 2002 (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2003b). One exception to this observation is in the offering of esubscription services, which rose from 15 sites in 2002 to the 33 in found in this study. Only three states have added polls, and in the case of one, the poll consisted of five simplistic questions, one open-ended comment, and no listing of results. None now has a public forums, and one that we found in 2002, Massachusetts' student-focused chatroom ("E-Vent") apparently no longer exists. Increases in interactive features, aside from esubscriptions, seem largely confined to rather peripheral areas such as virtual tours and exercises for children. While not necessarily superfluous, virtual tours do not strike us as the blossoming of cyberdemocracy.

The lack of online polling and public forums seems to indicate that state legislative websites are not exactly eager to provide easy means for public expression.

Several reasons can be advanced to explain this. The hosting of opinionated commentary and advocacy may violate the standards of non-partisanship under which some of these sites operate. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of obscene and/or libelous comments that could be posted in a forum. Government webmasters must then confront the problem of possibly removing content, and suffering the subsequent accusations of censorship and violations of the First Amendment.

Freewheeling public expression will also not warm the heart of legislators (or political scientists) who take a Burkean or Trusteeship view of the proper role of legislators -- neither will online polls which would immediately be suspected of manipulation by interest groups. Given that a legislative website is "owned" by all the members of a legislature, it is reasonable to suspect that a good number of these owners reject these features as instruments of good government.

Interactivity is a trendy term that is frequently used in a positive, yet often vague, manner. Perhaps the value of interactivity is being seriously blown out of proportion. It is very important to note that many non-interactive features, not evaluated in this study, are worthy elements of a website. Connecticut, for instance, has aids to navigation that are not interactive but nonetheless appeared to be very thoughtfully constructed and helpful to users. Educational material that is non-interactive can still be highly educational. A good site map, while non-interactive, is probably a more useful feature than a poorly working site search engine. A series of still pictures may provide a better view of the capitol than one picture that the user can spin.

To play devil's advocate for a moment, one could argue that a focus on interactivity rewards gimmicks at the expense of solid information. One rebuttal is that all features, interactive or not, can range from well-constructed, useful aspects to complete wastes of time. Beyond that obvious observation, one could explore whether interactive features have some inherent advantage, in that they hold the interest of the user for longer periods of time. Interactive educational material for children may be better than non-interactive features, on the assumption that the longer and/or more intensely the child is engaged with the site, the stronger will be an attachment or interest in government. Not being child psychologists, we will leave that determination to others. Suffice to say here that the addition of interactive games may make a long-term contribution to the worthy but often difficult goal of increasing political participation among young adults.

One might ask whether advocates of cyberdemocracy are focused too heavily on technology while losing sight of human behavior. Do they desire computer-based participation because they like high-end hardware, or do they share the long-running desire for enhanced civic engagement? If the desire is truly civic engagement, they should embrace it no matter how it is encouraged, and temper their fascination with clever technology. Put another way, what should the real goal of advocates of good government be? Interactivity for its own sake, or interaction, however promoted.

We would argue that website interactivity, in and of itself, is but one means to higher order goals. One should not forget that interaction can be fostered by both interactive and non-interactive means, both on and off the site. Interaction, or more broadly, civic engagement, is the more worthy objective. State legislature websites

already serve this goal by providing unprecedented access to information and convenient means to contact government officials. Some of this medium is interactive but much of it is not. So what? In this case the outcome is more important than the process.

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Appendix A

State Legislature Website Evaluation Form

Legislature: _____

URL: _____

Feature	Score	Comments
Public Forum	0	
Polling	3	
Active email to members	40	
Contact form to members	11	
Email to webmaster	42	
Feedback/contact forms	11	
Toll-free phone to members	14	
Toll-free phone hotline	15	
Fax numbers for members	37	
Submit Testimony	2	
Bill status	49	
Databases (such as LexisNexis)	15	
Site search engine	13	
Site map	27	
Interactive aids to navigation	2	
Who's my legislator?	43	
Request for reports	5	
Downloadable documents	49	
Subscribe to updates/pda	31	
eNewsletters	3	
Fees for documents or subscriptions	21	
Interactive educational material	12	
Lobbyist in a box	9	
Registration for hearings	1	
Streaming audio/video	35	
Giftshop	4	
Personal layouts	3	
Virtual Tours	14	
Cookies	37	

Note: Figures indicate the number of states whose website included the feature.