

# PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY NETWORKS

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## Summary

Building on the ideas presented by Roy Madron and John Jopling in their inspirational book, Gaian Democracies, this paper tentatively presents a rough concept for a piece of information architecture to facilitate participatory democracy worldwide.

Accepting that soft systems thinking is fundamental for human survival, this paper examines activity on the internet and proposes that one solid piece of open source code will revolutionise the internet like Google did, but to far greater effect.

This software will combine the power of the best search engines with news streams, video and voting. Linking the best bits of bulletin boards with Blogs (individual publishers), WIKIs (openly editable web pages) and action alerts, this software will consolidate existing networks engaged in positive, sustainable change. Designed along natural principles to incorporate feedbacks and lags, being self replicating and infinitely adaptable, the software will be hosted by individuals and will not produce conventional economic profit.

It will accelerate the level of local participation and global awareness required to avert environmental catastrophe by informing and empowering the human family to speak with many voices and unite behind one voice. By bringing relevance and location to the digital environment, it is suggested that this concept has the ability to liberate the democratic potential of the internet and reflect it back into the real world.

Examining online activities, we see the potential of this monumental idea is already being realised, and that a concept of this nature is in fact inevitable.

Stepping back outside the system, it is proposed that this concept is akin to the awakening of Gaia herself and the realisation of a new age of global consciousness.

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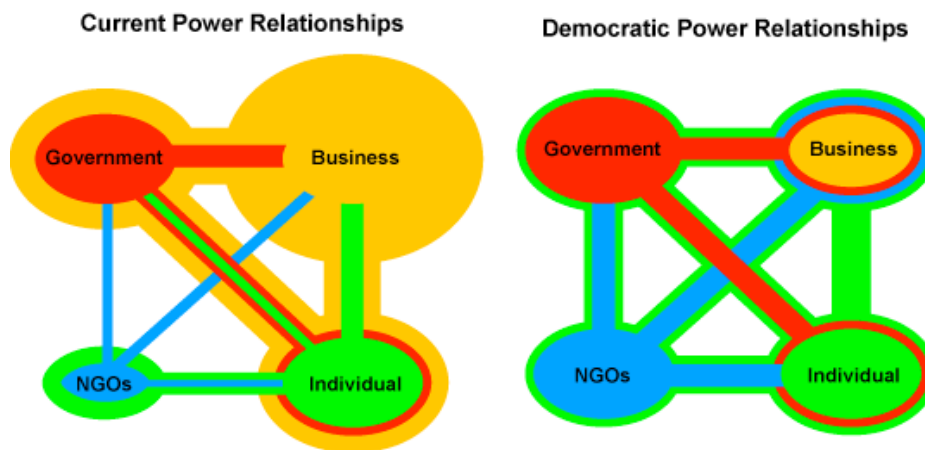
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## Introduction

It has been suggested that the internet evolves as a mirror of human society and that online communities are making up for the lack of real communities in our truly troubled world. In those terms, this paper is about liberating the democratic potential of the internet in order to nurture real democracies online and reflect them back into the real world. It is about bypassing society's symptoms and addressing the core causes of the global discomfort; it is about realising the magnitude of the human predicament and inspiring positive systemic change. The system we have is twisted. As Zac Goldsmith, editor of The Ecologist magazine, describes it, the present system 'is fundamentally rotten at the core'<sup>1</sup>. We need a new system if we are really going to survive.

### The need for structural changes



The above diagram illustrates the undemocratic nature of the current system and the required power<sup>a</sup> relationships of a truly democratic system. The extent to which any 'player' controls any other is represented by the extent to which its colour encapsulates any other. For example, in the current situation individuals influence business to some extent (by buying things) and the government to some extent (by voting) but do not control them, individuals only control the NGOs.

This new system is already being built. It is the decentralised, diversified world that follows nature's example. It is the alternative version of globalisation which Paul Kingsnorth describes so well in 'One no, many yeses'<sup>2</sup>, which delivers democracies instead of dictatorships, diversity instead of monoculture, decentralisation instead of concentration, sovereignty instead of dependence and access instead of enclosure. These are all aspects of a truly democratic future; of a democracy based on natural principles; of a model of government that ensures our societies are just and sustainable; of Gaian democracies.

This paper is a call to action. Its purpose is to inspire and connect the people with the skills, ambition and moral sensibility to create a truly democratic system; to build the information architecture that will liberate the internet and help instigate Gaian democracies worldwide. Never before has a task been so important:

***'Nothing short of a remodelling of the entire economic / political system can save us.'*<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> It is recognised that 'power' is an extremely complex word which is used here with caution but is considered necessary to describe the extent to which each player 'controls' another. The type of power referred to is hence 'power over' as opposed to 'power to'.

## Gaian democracies

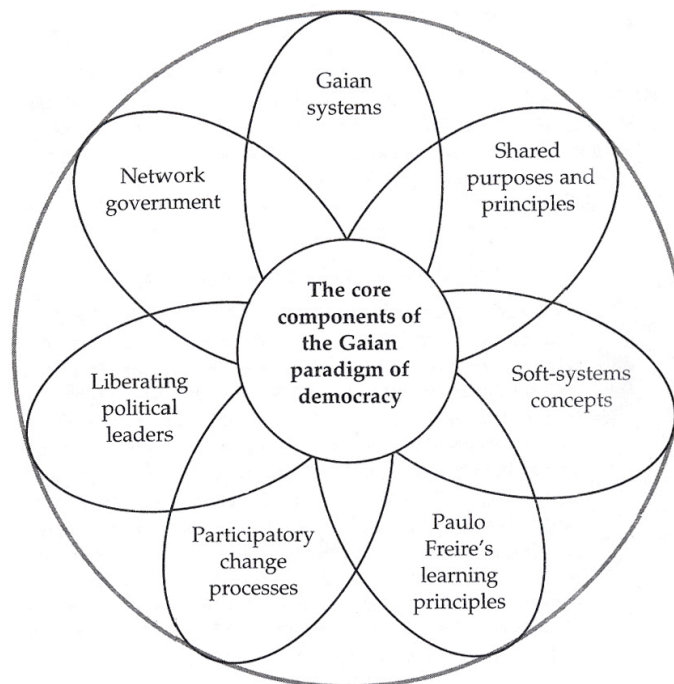
It is clear that the current global system is in no way sustainable or fair. But also that the current global system was never *meant* to sustainable or fair - these were never parts of its purpose. To ask such things of the present system is therefore asking the impossible; expecting them to happen (e.g. corporate social responsibility) is like dreaming the impossible dream.

To obtain a just and sustainable world, we need a system with just and sustainable purposes. This system has been described by Madron and Jopling as a global network of Gaian democracies.

### So what are Gaian democracies and how do they work?

In short, they are networks of stakeholders and citizens who participate in truly democratic governance. By voting, speaking, meeting and engaging others in dialogue which leads to co-operation, collaboration and advanced understanding, participants in the Gaian democratic process are all highly valued, contributory players. They are members of a network government which recognises the need for (and value of) local decentralised authorities. They are the decision makers and the instigators of participatory change processes, allowing this system of governance to be an evolving, learning, adaptive system following the concepts of soft-systems theory.

Soft systems are defined by their purposes and principles. The purpose of our current economic system is to increase economic growth; its principles are exploitation (of natural resources, human potential, etc), consumption, production, finance, interest and fierce financial competition. This is the 'debt money' system<sup>4</sup>. A Gaian system involves **shared purposes and principles** more appropriate for participants like the human family. These are developed through intensive participation and may vary wildly from place to place, region to region and country to country, but will provide the framework under which all decisions are made.



### The Gaian paradigm of democracy

'The model has both a political and systems dimension. Its purpose in political terms is to initiate the co-creation of just and sustainable societies; in systems terms the purpose is to facilitate the purposeful evolution of our societies, from youthful systems pursuing exponential growth to mature systems in a state of dynamic stability in equilibrium with our environment.' (Madron & Jopling 2003 pp.108)

Gaian democracies clearly operate within Gaian parameters, and so respect the link between humanity and nature: 'Gaia is a system of interacting biological and material subsystems that have co-evolved together over billions of years and depend on each other.'<sup>5</sup> These biological subsystems allowed humanity to evolve and we can not afford to disregard them now.

The other components of Gaian democracies involve leaders and learning. Such a system will not survive with conventional command and control leadership. A truly democratic Gaian system will replace this type of authority with liberating leaders who see the value of people-power, are willing to learn, and divorce conventional, oppressive monologue for the liberating potential of dialogue. This is the principle by which we learn - the 'corruption' of original ideas is essential to the development and inspiration of new ideas.<sup>6</sup> 'The best way to start learning is as part of a dialogue-rich group' and 'the richest learning begins with action, is shaped by reflection and leads to further action'.<sup>7</sup>

These are the principles of Gaian Democracies. We must learn about these principles and involve others in dialogue about them now.

***'We are in a race to reconfigure our democratic systems before  
Gaia launches her own systems shift.  
All we can hope is that Gaia does not get there first.'***<sup>8</sup>

## The online revolution

The parallels between the Gaian democratic model and the nature of the internet have not gone unnoticed. Douglas Rushkoff's paper, Open Source Democracy: How online communication is changing offline politics,<sup>9</sup> is an admirable summary of the present situation in which he argues 'it may not be too late to promote a globalism modeled on cooperation instead of competition, and on organic interchange instead of financial transaction'.

Rushkoff recommends that

*'For politicians who mean to lead more effectively in such an environment, the interactive solution may well be a new emphasis on education, where elected leaders use the internet to engage with constituents and justify the decisions they have made on our behalf, rather than simply soliciting moment-to-moment opinions'.*

Although laced with truth, this statement does not do justice to the truly democratic nature of the web: we don't want politicians to 'justify' their decisions ***we want to make the decisions ourselves!***

As John Turnbull reports, South Korea's online revolution (with over 75% of households connected to the web via ultra-fast broadband) is not just about games and online shopping but ***is transforming politics and democracy***<sup>10</sup>.

Richard Swift, in an article about the problems of life after communism, writes that ***every*** member of an Armenian focus group 'felt their ***access to the internet was very important to democracy***'.<sup>11</sup>

Rushkoff uses example like 'the Iraqi Blogger' to demonstrate the way in which independent, autonomous networks can transform opinions, which are so susceptible to manipulation through conventional media channels. He argues that 'The experience of open source (software) development, or even just the acceptance of its value as a model for others, provides real-life practice for the

deeper change in perspective required if we are to move into a more networked and emergent understanding of our world.'

It is these developments within the open source community, in which programmers work not for money but to facilitate human learning, technical ability and understanding, which we turn to now. This community, which has already shown its potential, is now presented with the task of re-programming our twisted system.

## The concept

The basic concept is a piece of information architecture - a piece of open source software designed to liberate the democratic potential of the web through a series of participatory networks. This software incorporates the concepts of soft systems by being adaptive, self-organising, distributed, flexible (allowed to fluctuate within limits) and diversified, whilst encouraging variety, incorporating feedback and anticipating system 'lag'. It employs chaos mathematics to provide the information architecture which Gaian democracies demand.

### So, how would it work?

Users log on to the closest node of the participatory democracy network (PDN) using a username, postcode and password. The postcode, prefixed with a country code, automatically routes users to their local PDN server, which remains their point of contact with the network until a new PDN is set up closer to their location.

The PDN is hosted by individuals who load the software onto their existing web servers, setting limits for its disk space and bandwidth. As more users join the network, causing a specific server to near capacity, the PDN posts a request to all users to find someone willing to offer it more space. The network is therefore self seeding, like a strawberry plant sending out 'runners' once it becomes established.

Once logged on to their local server, users can search the web, chat, post news stories and perform a multitude of other tasks, as well as modify their account.

Each user enters a range of settings in order to personalise their account. These settings then act as a filter limiting the quantity and raising the quality of the information they receive. The beauty of the PDN is that these settings are infinitely variable and adaptable, ensuring that only credible, relevant information reaches the user.

### Posts

Any user can post information on the PDN, as long as they specify its relevance. All posts use the same criteria to limit the circulation of information to the sphere in which it is relevant. These criteria are: (or similar terms)

- Street
- Neighbourhood
- Borough
- City
- County
- Country
- Continent
- World

Since the network knows where the user is posting from (by their postcode) the post only circulates within the specified zone of relevance. The more quality information a user provides about a post, the better it will perform. Each post will have a minimum amount of meta data written by the PDN, for example:

- Date
- Time
- Writer

But a user may (and should) choose to add as much relevant information about their post as possible in order to clarify its nature. For example a user may specify:

- Title
- Subject/s
- Keywords
- Expiry date
- And any other category they consider appropriate

As a post circulates the network it will accumulate 'views', like topics on a bulletin board and, if required, 'votes' from readers who agree with the post, thereby increasing its weighting. Any post whose votes accelerate quickly would automatically become 'red flagged' by the network as being of major concern/interest.

### **Votes**

If, for example, Ken Livingstone decided to offer a new bus service from London to Glasgow, a vote could begin immediately. All those in favour of Ken's proposal could vote for his post; all those against could ignore it, write their own, or lobby for more time or better proposals. The relevance of these posts would only ever be 'City' since the buses would only stop in London and Glasgow, so only people in those two cities would be made aware of the vote.

### **Filters**

Even then, some users may not care about the bus - they may have a car and not be interested in the vote. In that case, when the post comes through they simply specify 'never again' and will be omitted from public transport related posts until they modify their account settings. As John Turnbull points out, filters of this nature have the potential to create 'information caves', an issue which requires further debate. (see [here](#))

### **Searches**

All searches would be equally filterable since the PDN would know who was searching. For example, a user might want to search for a specific Beatles song, but just typing in 'Beatles song' brings back thousands of results. So, to limit the search, the user browses additional categories of meta data such as 'title', 'album', 'date', etc and selects those of interest to search via. But, to further refine the search, a user may also add an new category of metadata for example, they may want to search by 'key'. Having entered this additional category, the user can then search for a Beatles song in 'A minor'. Any other user could then also use the 'key' category, thus improving the quality of their search. A system of this nature would obviously generate a multitude of subjects and categories. Some categories may be allocated by mistake like 'smell' for a song, for example. These and other maliciously added categories would degrade over time and eventually fall out of the system, since people are unlikely to search for 'songs' involving particular 'smells'.

### **Digital robots**

Each PDN user will be provided with their own 'digital agent', a search spider which is programmed when the user specifies interests and categories for their account. Since these categories and the filters applicable to them are virtually unlimited, these robots will search out the network and deliver *only* information

and polls of specific relevance to each user. They will work in the users' absence and be accessible via any telephone or web enabled device.

Digital robots will also serve a second purpose by transferring and exchanging information. They will become the workforce and 'town crier' of the PDN, delivering packages of information and passing on the latest news.

These concepts are not new. They are everywhere and they belong to no one. The next step in the process towards Gaian democracies is to link these concepts together and build the information architecture required to liberate the democratic potential of the web.

## Conclusion

The internet benefits greatly from its ability to promote dialogue between different countries and cultures. However, the anonymity and internationalism of web-based communication do not appear conducive to community regeneration. The web links users from opposite sides of the world, but rarely people from within the same community. Because its users remain anonymous, the web remains faceless; there is scant relation between the tangible and digital environments.

An alternative system, designed to reflect real issues and garner positive participation in the democratic process, requires relevance to be specified to location. Only by re-integrating aspects of the real world with the digital can we hope to work effectively in this novel environment. To personalise the web and bring home issues of local significance, issues within peoples 'circle of concern', we need to put our digital roots down - to connect the web back to the real world.

These concepts will catalyse the true power of the PDN to inspire 'real' active participation in local dialogue whilst increasing 'digital' global dialogue. This rich information exchange has the ability to 'hot wire' more than just a 'digital revolution' or 'global renaissance'; it is kick starting an evolutionary leap of universal significance. 'As the communication links within humanity increase, we will eventually reach a time when the billions of information exchanges shuttling through the networks at any one time would create patterns of coherence in the global brain similar to those found in the human brain. Gaia would then awaken and become her equivalent of conscious.'<sup>12</sup>

Believe it or not, your help is required to build successful democracies that are just and sustainable. If you have anything to offer - feedback on this concept, constructive criticism, alternative ideas or programming skills - please visit the forum at [www.wwdemocracy.org](http://www.wwdemocracy.org) now.

***Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.  
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.***

Goethe

## Current software:

The PDN software must incorporate a combination of the ideas similar to:

Postcodes: <http://www.xyzmaps.com/postcode.htm>  
 WIKIs: <http://www.ouranswer.org/wiki/index.php/Wiki>  
 BLOGs: <http://www.blogger.com/about.pyra>  
 Dashboards: [http://www.infovis.net/E-zine/2004/num\\_143.htm](http://www.infovis.net/E-zine/2004/num_143.htm)  
 Google: <http://www.google.com/>  
 News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>  
 On-line voting: <http://www.j-dom.org/h/f/JDOM/blog//1//>  
 Spiders/robots/digital agents: <http://www.robotstxt.org/wc/faq.html>  
 Geo location finders: <http://geourl.org/>  
 Up my street: <http://www.upmystreet.com/>

And many, many other concepts.

## Highly related projects:

Worldwide democracy network: <http://www.wwdemocracy.org/>  
 Democracies Online <http://www.e-democracy.org/do/>  
 e-Democracy <http://www.opendemocracy.net/>  
 v-2 Organisation <http://v-2.org/index.php>  
 Demos Greenhouse: <http://www.demosgreenhouse.co.uk/>  
 Designing Effective action alerts: <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/alerts.html>  
 Open source programming: <http://sourceforge.net/>  
 Social science gateway:\_(Search for democracy) <http://www.sosiq.ac.uk/>  
 D2 Discussion Zone <http://discuss.democracy2.org/>  
 [ udoo ] » wtf1:one [http://udoo.org/wtf1\\_one\\_voice](http://udoo.org/wtf1_one_voice)  
 Our Answer: [http://www.ouranswer.org/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://www.ouranswer.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page)  
 Democracy online: <http://www.democracy-online.org/>  
 Emergent Democracy <http://joi.ito.com/static/emergentdemocracy.html>  
 Stand: Defining Digital Freedoms In The UK <http://www.stand.org.uk/>  
 Mapocracy : A visual web democracy toolkit <http://mapocracy.sourceforge.net/>  
 The WIKI for better democracy <http://www.betterdemocracy.net/>  
 Social networking software: <http://www.orgnet.com/>

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- <sup>2</sup> Kingsnorth P. (2003) **One No, Many Yeses**, The Free Press, London
- <sup>3</sup> Madron M. & Jopling J. (2003) **Gaian Democracies: Redefining Globalisation & People-power** Greenbooks, Dartington, Devon pp.97
- <sup>4</sup> Pettifor A. (2003) **The Real World Economic Outlook: The Legacy of Globalisation: Debt and Deflation**. Palgrave Macmillan
- <sup>5</sup> Madron M. & Jopling J. *ibid* pp.110
- <sup>6</sup> Sylvester-Bradley P.C. (1973) **The Corruption of ideas**, Leicester University, Leicester.
- <sup>7</sup> Madron M. & Jopling J. *ibid* pp.114
- <sup>8</sup> Madron M. & Jopling J. *ibid* pp.110
- <sup>9</sup> Rushkoff D. (2003) **Open Source Democracy: How online communication is changing offline politics** Demos, London [www.rushkoff.com/downloads/opensourcedemocracy.pdf](http://www.rushkoff.com/downloads/opensourcedemocracy.pdf)
- <sup>10</sup> Turnball J. (2004) **All Changes issue 4 – February 2004** <http://www.wwdemocracy.org/>
- <sup>11</sup> Swift R. (2004) **The Wild East**, New Internationalist 366, April 2004, Oxford.
- <sup>12</sup> Russell P. (2000) **The Global Brain Awakens: Our next evolutionary leap**. Element books, Boston MA.