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# The Tocqueville Lens – Informing the Design of the New Township

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## Abstract

Since the advent of the public internet in the 1990's, the golden promise of a digitally-enhanced democracy has loomed large for many different stakeholders in American democracy. During the first wave of the internet at the beginning of the 1990's, online media was thought to be a faster, more widely-available version of the newspaper, which, according to Tocqueville, was integral to 1830's American Democracy. Currently online media is thought to be a novel means by which practical civic and political engagement (Klein) and e-Democracy can be created through the concept of Social Capital (Putnam). In this paper, I argue that, truer to Tocqueville's ideas of the strength of the New England Town meeting, current

forms of collaborative online media, more than merely enabling practical civic and political engagement, are also serving, as the 1830's Township did for its constituents, as a formative environment where local citizens gain and learn what they need to in order to then become effective *national* citizens. With 67 percent of the U.S. population now online, and with many of them participating in collaborative online environments (Pew, 2008), the philosophical commitments of the designers of these media must therefore be informed from not only a traditional design perspective, but also a socio-political one as well. In this paper, I offer a simplified version of Tocqueville's account of the strength of the New England Township as a lens through which designers of online communities can start to inform design theory and practice.

## Keywords

Democracy, HCI, online communities, Tocqueville, Design

## ACM Classification Keywords

K4. Computers and Society

### **Introduction**

One of the most complete and foundational accounts of early American democracy was penned by French sociologist Alexis DeTocqueville in the mid-1830's. His volume *Democracy in America*, provides deep insight into America's land, its people, its government, especially as they contrast those of England and France – places which Tocqueville had also studied extensively. Of Tocqueville it was written that "He was thus able to read off the message of coming change in France and America as if he were reading aloud from a text that had been handed to him." (McLuhan, p. 111)

Tocqueville had two important insights into the young America that have sparked a good deal of speculation among those hoping to understand the role that digital media plays in American Democracy. The first is his claim that the township was instrumental to the development of a democratically-sophisticated American citizenry (he uses the New England township as an exemplar of this).

The second is his claim of the importance of the newspaper in the American Political system, particularly in its ability to enable the proliferation of American associations – another means by which American democracy seems to thrive.

In this paper I will deal specifically with American democracy since it is what I know best – and it was of course the focus of Tocqueville's work – but many of the concepts in this paper can also be applied to other democracies.

### **Tocqueville's Township**

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis De Tocqueville writes of the New England township that

*"In that part of the Union political life was born in the very heart of the townships; one might almost say that in origin each of them was a little independent nation." (Tocqueville, p. 67).*

These townships, according to Tocqueville, serve as semi-autonomous subsections of the American system of government that both serve to decentralize national political power, while centralizing its smaller local sibling. This subsection known as the township seems to Tocqueville to be a sort of local citizens' training ground, where the fledgling American citizen

*".is attached to his township because it is strong and independent; he has an interest in it because he shares in its management; he loves it because he has no reason to complain of his lot; he invests his ambition and his future in it; in the restricted sphere within his scope, he learns to rule society; he gets to know those formalities without which freedom can advance only through revolutions, and becoming imbued with their spirit, develops a taste for order, understands the harmony of powers, and in the end accumulates clear, practical ideas about the nature of his duties and the extent of his rights." (Tocqueville, p. 70).*

### **The American Newspaper**

Of the American newspaper and its relationship to the associations that he points out are so prevalent in American society, Tocqueville writes that

*"They need some means of talking every day without seeing one another and of acting together without meeting. So hardly any democratic association can carry on without a newspaper." (Tocqueville, p. 518)*

### **The Functional Mistake**

During the first wave of the public Internet at the beginning of the 1990's, online media was thought to be a faster, more widely-available version of the newspaper, which, according to Tocqueville, was integral to 1830's democracy. In addition, online media is sometimes thought to be a novel or peripheral means for enabling practical civic and political engagement (Klein) and e-Democracy which can be created through the creation of social capital (Putnam).

There has been a great deal of debate over whether or not online and offline creation of social capital (Putnam) translates to greater civic engagement, and Putnam himself has even cited Tocqueville's work as supporting his claim that it does, but the weight of written evidence seems to agree with Tocqueville scholar Robert Gannett, who criticizes Putnam's reading of Democracy in America by writing,

*"..we simply cannot equate family picnics with various types of political engagement if we hope to make our democracy work." (Gannett, 2003)*

Instead it is clear that the power of the New England Township did not lie merely in its pragmatic ability to allow connections between people – social capital, but more importantly in its power to teach and train its constituents to be better citizens, by providing them with the elements, mentioned previously, that made the township an integral part of American democracy.

### **Web 2.0 More Like a Township Than a Website**

Where the web of the 1990's helped to fulfill Tocqueville's idea of the newspaper's decentralizing power – only more quickly and widely, the recent change to what has been termed "Web 2.0" defines the internet a far more collaborative space where a combination of new technologies, new levels of user literacy and increases in technology dispersion have enabled users of the web to also become creators – and for anyone on the web to be able to more quickly and easily maintain friendships through *social networks*, co-create digital media through the use of blogs and wikis for example, and even organize to co-create tangible products through crowdsourcing websites.

In fact current web 2.0 digital media are quite similar to Tocqueville's description of the New England township in many dimensions. As a simple example, the following table provides a comparison of the popular online website Digg.com to Tocqueville's township. Digg.com, a website whose content is made up of completely user-generated, user-rated and user-discussed media, has gained 500,000 users (there are varying estimates of this number) since its inception in 2004.

<b>New England Township</b>	<b>Digg.com</b>
It is strong and independent	Digg is privately funded, and some actions taken by the CEO on behalf of the users have been so independent as to flirt with illegality.
He shares in its management	Everyone who is part of Digg helps to generate and filter the content that eventually shows up on the site.
He invests his future and ambitions in it	Each user accumulates points and ratings over time. Many people spend a good deal of time and effort improving their ratings.
Allows him to learn to rule society within the a restricted scope	Digg is run by a series of community up and down votes, which allow the individual to learn how collective action works.
Allows him to get to know the forms of freedom	Digg has strict (if sometimes obfuscated) formal rules within its community that restrict the freedom of the user.
Develops his taste for	Digg has created and publicized the

order	mechanisms it uses to maintain order within the community.
Allows him to understand the harmony of powers	Digg.com has gone through and made public many of its power struggles with media companies, competitors and the law.
Provides clear, practical information about his duties and rights	The actions and rights afforded to the user are clearly laid out in the Digg.com "about" page.

### **Community Rebellion – An Example from Digg.com**

It is worth our time to consider the online community Digg.com as an example of what Tocqueville might call an independent, scope-restricted, collaboratively-managed *online* community that is *"..composed of coarser elements, often recalcitrant to the lawgiver's activity."* (Tocqueville, p. 62)

Similar to Tocqueville's approach which used the New England township as a representative for most American townships, I too will use Digg as representative of the majority of collaborative online communities, which also include elements of community content generation and community voting as a means of democratic self-management.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007 a member of the web community Digg.com posted an illegal 16-digit hexadecimal number, used to lock up HD-DVD movies, to the public portion of the website. Initially the administrators of Digg.com deleted the post, but a significant portion of the approximately 500,000-member community then organized to ensure that every user-voted item on the front page of Digg contained the illegal key. Finally Kevin Rose, Digg's founder, posted a message on the Digg blog, stating that Digg would no longer delete the illegal posts, despite threats of legal action sent to Digg on behalf of the AACS Licensing Authority, which controls the anti-copying technology underlying HD-DVD. (Digg Users Revolt) Though assessment of the fact is beyond the scope of this paper, it is reasonable to assume that the thousands of users who took part in this event – and who take part in similar events every day on Digg.com and the hundreds of other collaborative, democratic web properties every day, have their civic habits and tastes shaped by their participation.

### **Tocqueville's Township as Socio-Political Design Lens at Two Levels**

With 67 percent of American citizens now online (Pew, 2008) to websites many of which are collaborative and democratic, there is a good chance that, like the citizens of the 1830's New England township, these citizens are learning – both explicitly and tacitly - ways of acting in digital and perhaps too in physical civil society. To the extent that these "digital townships" are shaping our democracy, the philosophical commitments of designers must therefore be informed through both a traditional design lens, but also a socio-political one as well. There are two inter-related levels

on which the design of online communities lives. Both must be considered by the responsible practitioner.

#### *Intra-Community (the township)*

It is clear from Tocqueville's account of the New England township – and is perhaps even more clear from the fact that the town meeting is still a part of everyday life in New England (Bryan, 2003) – that the township and its method of local self-government has a high degree of self-sustaining internal power. Many of the current online communities like Digg.com which exhibit relative longevity (when compared to the short average life of their peers) appear to tap into some of the characteristics the Tocqueville noted as contributing to the success of the township itself, before consideration of the broader effect that these then have on the national democracy.

#### *Pan-Community (the broader democracy)*

It is also clear from Tocqueville's account of the New England township that its method of local self-government has great power within the community of communities: the broader democracy. American townships, according to Tocqueville,

*"..form a complete and regular whole; they are ancient; law and, even more, mores make them strong; and the exercise immense human influence over the whole of society." (Tocqueville, 63)*

The use of what I am calling here the *Tocqueville lens* to simultaneously view online community design from both the intra- and pan-community perspectives suggests a broad and perhaps practically intractable design philosophy for interaction designers who are only now beginning to wrestle with the social

implications of their designs. (Bødker) It is preferable, however, to work from the intractable to the tractable in such important matters, so the remainder of this paper will attempt to make move the practice of online community design closer to practical application of this.

### **The Tocqueville Lens In-Practice**

In the following short paragraphs, I have adapted the Tocqueville township lens to online communities. When we apply this lens, we are better able to both analyze and design online communities with township-like intra- and pan-community dynamics.

#### *Ensure that the community is strong and independent*

Strength and independence of the community has multiple effects on its members (this is of course a recursive relationship). Perhaps the most important is the strength imputed to the member as a result of his membership. As Tocqueville said of the American tendency to form associations,

*"Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power conspicuous from the distance whose actions serve as an example; when it speaks, men listen." (Tocqueville, 516)*

There is therefore a positive correlation between the strength of the community and the strength of its members. It is this strength that therefore attracts and maintains membership among those seeking greater power than they might have had individually.

#### *Allow the member to share in its management*

There is a strong relationship between the strength and independence of a community and the share its members have in its management. This is to say that the greater the strength and independence of the community, the greater the shares of management that its members can have. This was particularly true in the American township, of which Tocqueville wrote that

*"..no administrative authority whatsoever thinks of standing in their way." (Tocqueville, 67)*

By providing share in its management, the community then taps into the next important dynamic in a community:

#### *Provide a way for the member to invest his future and ambitions in it*

By tapping into a member's future and ambition by allowing him to invest these through his share of management, a community at once secures his allegiance and his ongoing effort. It is at this point that the goals of the community and of the member begin to align.

#### *Help the member to learn to rule society within a restricted scope*

Within a restricted scope, the member of a community can exercise his considerable local power without fear of catastrophic global consequences. He can then more gradually develop the skills, within his intra-community interactions, that will then allow him to operate more effectively in pan-community ones.

*Allow the member to get to know the forms of freedom*

Forms of freedom, in Tocqueville's accounting, are those "...without which freedom can only advance only through revolutions." (Tocqueville, p. 70) In order to maintain intra-community vibrancy and order, it is necessary to design easily-learnable and self-justifying forms of interaction and governance that prevent revolt in the form of either mass desertion of a community, or fractious behavior. Part of becoming a member of any community is the development of literacy about its norms. The culture of freedom in a democracy requires a great deal of literacy.

*Develops the member's taste for order*

Freedom literacy in a democracy includes a taste for order. Without it, any democracy would quickly descend into chaos. The development of this taste cannot be thrust upon the member, however. It must be cultivated, as Tocqueville seems to suggest, through a culture of freedom and order.

*Help the member to understand the harmony of powers*

In any community online or offline, there are powers which ebb and flow against one another. For a community to exist, multiple powers must exist in some sort of harmony. In order for a member to effectively submit to and wield those powers, however, the appropriate harmonies must first be well-understood.

*Provide clear, practical information about the member's duties and rights*

In online communities, members must know their

duties and rights in order to quickly form a cognitive concept of their sphere of influence, its boundaries, and therefore their space of possible action. Once these are understood, the community member is then free to act and interact without fear of surprise retribution due to an unintentional transgression of community laws or norms.

**Discussion**

We are only beginning to understand the ways in which the so-called Web 2.0 community will affect American democracy beyond the simple and overly-pragmatic view that it will merely provide another channel for information dissemination. It is becoming clear that its influence is at once more subtle and probably more profound, shaping the way citizens conceive of their place and their potential spheres of influence in a modern democratic society. As these effects become more prevalent and deeply-felt, the importance increases that the designer of these online communities – a new sort of town planner – begins to develop more sophisticated socio-political lenses by which she can inform her design theory and practice.

Tocqueville's lens is one attempt at this, but there should be others. We presently stand at the edge of an era where larger numbers of people in a more dispersed number of locations are rapidly learning new methods to create, debate, manage and organize socially, economically and politically. These new methods are created to afford certain dynamics by designers who are relatively unaware of their role in the developing democracy, and who are ill-equipped to deal with that awareness when it does occur. It behooves us to search our history for productive analogues that can guide us in creating our democratic future.

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