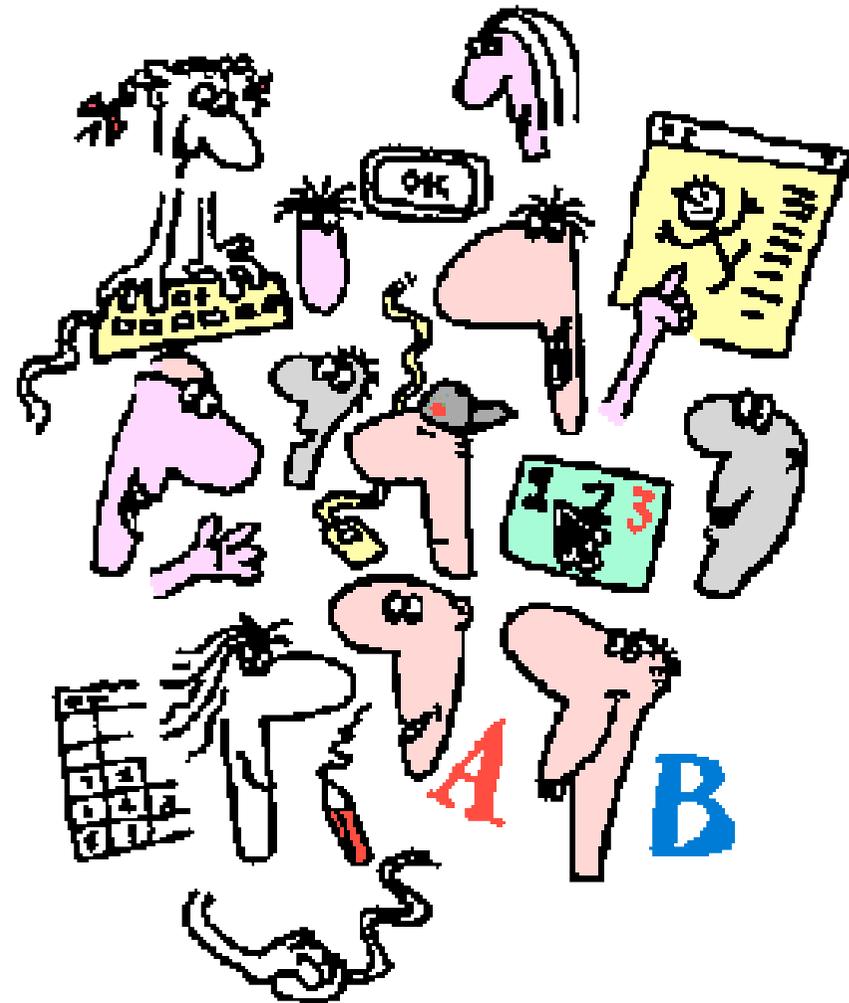


# exploring e-democracy

a Great Yarmouth,  
Microsoft and  
Ultralab collaboration



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## Exploring e-democracy (e-government, e-talk, ...)

Democracy is derived from two ancient Greek words demos (the people) and kratos (strength). It is also defined as *A form of government in which the citizens share the power*. So why are 18 to 21 year olds so apathetic that only 38% voted in the 2001 elections?

*“The engagement of young people, I don't mean just people between 16 and 18, but from teenage onwards, is a critical problem and an issue that we need to face. There needs to be a better connection between all aspects of the state and institutions and young people.”*

Lord Falconer, the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs  
Observer 7th December 2003

It is generally acknowledged that the impact of ICT has been a democratising one, giving people more say and more control over the TV they watch, the music they listen to, and the hobbies they share. This has created a climate of expectation that has led many to be disappointed with the democratic processes of local government.

*” Millions voted for Big Brother and were happy to pay for the privilege, probably because they thought they were making a difference. Few get the same thrill when given the chance to vote in general elections.”*

Jonathan Parry (17) the Guardian April 13, 2004

The result is that there has been a significant flight from voting participation or even interest and awareness in some of the primary institutions and instruments of democracy. Britain's voting apathy is apparent, with only 28% of Britons stating they'll vote in the EU elections this year. Yet the government realizes the urgency of re-engaging young people and is planning to build political interest. The Electoral Commission has recommended reducing the age limit for prospective MPs from 21 to 18 and will revisit the argument to lower the voting age to 16 in five to seven years time.

The challenge for this project is to establish what the engaging, delightful and productive activities are that can be made available through the new technologies that will lead the under 35s to voting, or at least to some level of interest and engagement in the democratic process.

The intention in this initial pilot is to try out a variety of strategies and approaches that begin to give a clearer understanding and indeed definition of what might work. Subsequent work could build that prototype and develop its use to a large scale.

Throughout the pilot, keywords that will drive the designs forward must include scalability, engagement and inclusion in its broadest sense.

## **The Great Yarmouth e-democracy project**

This project seeks to use the large screen in the centre of Great Yarmouth as a focus for interaction between members of the community and Great Yarmouth council, using mobile phone texting (SMS) technology. At the end of the week, a panel including a member of the council and a youth representative discuss the issues raised and reflect on the contributions and the issues they raise.

### **What are the benefits for young people?**

- The ability to identify with political issues because they are founded on their local and genuine concerns.
- Gaining a sense of community where they feel engaged rather than alienated and have an authentic voice that is heard and respected.
- A better possibility of government policies that are in tune with youth issues and views.
- The opportunity to participate in the creation of an entirely new, 21st century forum for the expression, examination, debate and solution of issues.
- Experience and insight into the way that decision-making processes can be influenced by greater participation and involvement.

These aims are indicative but not prescriptive.

### **The research**

There are numbers of research questions to be addressed including:

- What will be delightful, engaging and effective?
- How will the delightfulness be sustained?
- How can direct involvement between the younger generation and politicians be established and sustained?
- What platforms, activities and technologies can build e-democracy that young people feel is relevant, effective and engaging?
- How can young people's concerns influence policy and process?
- Are we drawing young people into traditional democracy or are we extending the democratic system?
- What is the impact of the individual micro projects on all partners and stakeholders?
- What encourages participants to highlight local issues /or propose solution?
- Can members of the community be motivated to research local issues and does this increase their engagement in the political process?
- What can build a sense of ownership for young people?

## **Background**

Earlier in 2004 Ultralab proposed five different e-democracy micro projects to Microsoft for funding, with the aim of engaging the community, and especially eighteen to thirty-five year olds through using ICT technologies and media to engage with political issues. These micro projects were designed to be implemented to stand-alone or to complement and build on each other. The Interactive town square project was chosen from these.

After visiting SeaChange in Great Yarmouth and seeing the exciting work progressing there, it was clear that the Town Screen and their community video stories initiative closely reflect the intention of the e-democracy project vision, and that synergies and opportunities deserve to be explored. The enthusiastic work being generated by SeaChange in collaboration with their partners is rare, worthy of support and has the potential to provide a rich research base. It is also clear that Great Yarmouth council is responsive, supportive of innovation and has a track record of consulting with and empowering their local community. A council's willingness to engage in dialogue is of course a pre-requisite for this project

During October and November 2004, members of Ultralab met with representatives from SeaChange, InteGREAT and the council, and formed a group with the aim of running the project as a pilot in the week at the end of November. This week was initially planned to culminate with a final panel event (see scenario below) on the afternoon of the 27<sup>th</sup> before the lighting of the town Christmas lights.

The preliminary study explored how to ensure that the project would be a positive experience for all stakeholders. It was found that there are a number of active community support groups in Great Yarmouth. Of these, Yarmouth Youth Services, YMCA, Mind, Connexions and Flegg High school have expressed genuine interest in the project and between them have offered support ranging from distributing leaflets and posters, access to the student council and young members for project design ideas, planning curriculum relevant activities, providing members for the discussion panel, and supporting young people to be e-mentors and researchers.

During the planning period several unforeseen issues became apparent however. One was that there was more enthusiasm for the project than anticipated. This led to the likelihood that significant national media interest would be generated. This requires confidence that the technologies will integrate and run smoothly and reliably. However, the large screen service-provider proved unresponsive. Also, the increasing profile of the project indicated that there are rich opportunities for exploring e-governance synergies. Also, the interest of the business community, along with the possibilities of extending the reach of the project through local radio, provides the opportunity for significantly increasing the impact of the project. It is therefore apparent that the project will benefit from more planning time.

## **Rationale**

A number of synergies exist with the council and the inteGREAT business partnership. The council is currently involved in implementing current e-governance requirements. The e-democracy project can provide a lively, engaging and immediate window onto this. Furthermore, both the council and inteGREAT are also committed to exploring the participative use of the large screen. It is also likely that partnership with a company of Microsoft's status can attract additional funding and resources from local businesses, thereby engaging a wider audience, and ensuring that the event has effective publicity both within the Great Yarmouth community and nationally through the national media. This looks like a genuine win-win!

Besides the immediate impact, the project also has longer-term relevance to the council as it explores potential methodologies for agile, large-scale and informal community consultation using the large screen and SMS technologies. The project will also evaluate the effectiveness of these to empower young people to become more actively involved in their community. This is clearly also of national interest. The project's brave and constructive use of large screen technologies can provide a model for the many organisations that have installed public large screens. And of course, e-democracy will be in the spotlight as the election approaches, especially in relation to engaging the young vote. And because Yarmouth benefits from being in a contained location, it has an excellent chance of generating active participation because the local community are committed to their town, community and environs.

Certainly in school terms, community democracy activities map directly onto the citizenship curriculum, something that is generally welcomed by teachers as a contribution to what has been a very difficult area to address. It can also provide students with evidence of the council's interest in hearing their voices. The research will explore whether this might motivate future voting and community participation.

In summary, the overall aim of the project is to research how we can generate and support dialogue between young voters and political representatives on issues of concern, with the aim of clarifying misconceptions on both sides and empowering young people to take an active interest in local politics. There is no doubt that this would be widely welcomed by politicians and of genuine interest to the media, particularly if we can be agile enough to respond to the approaching general election. Artists, famous personalities and writers might be invited to participate as consultants and Masters of Ceremony. In pursuit of this goal, there are a number of additional benefits for all stakeholders. These include, developing robust methodologies for using large screens with SMS technologies, publicising GY council's e-government objectives, engaging local business and community groups in positive public conversations about issues of community import, and the opportunity to impact significantly on e-democracy practice.

Below follows a scenario exploring how this works.

## **The Great Yarmouth interactive town square scenario.**

Using the focus of the large screen in Great Yarmouth's town square, we begin building interest with an invitation to participate via local community groups and businesses, leaflets, posters, advertisements on the large screen itself, and announcements via local radio and press. A range of activities can encourage both the brave and the nervous to join in. Some may simply request a tune to be played in the town square, from a list. Others might respond to a positive and ice-breaking question such as "how can we make Yarmouth Greater?". Although our target is primarily 16-35 year olds, many of who are used to texting (SMS), Great Yarmouth has a large aging population who are also encouraged to join in. This will be assisted via "roving" young volunteers sponsored by their community group. The task of these young folk will be encourage people to join in the conversation and to show mobile phone owners how to use them to SMS. Where someone doesn't own one, they will write down people's contributions and submit these to the e-democracy booth, where they are contributed via wireless internet. Alternately, the young person might SMS the message on people's behalf via the project's mobile phones/ sim cards. These young folk, in their role as co-researchers, can also ask members of the public what their response and preferences are.

Thus over a period, the contributions start to build. Particularly interesting messages will be highlighted full screen during lunchtimes and other busy periods, interspersed with the current programming. For the rest of the time, messages are displayed at the bottom of the screen as "ticker tape".

There is no doubt that the opportunity of having such a large instant Graffiti board might prove too tempting for some. For this reason, all messages sent to the screen will be at least moderated or perhaps even facilitated. In the first instance, technology will automatically filter all contributions and replace any obscenities with asterisks. A moderator will then manually delete any inflammatory / defamatory messages (and record this for the research findings). Facilitation on the other hand, can ensure that questions are relevant to the town square audience's immediate interests; relate to current events or build on previous contributions, and thereby generate a loose form of "conversation".

People who aren't present in the town square won't be excluded of course. A Great Yarmouth large screen website will be linked to the SMS database, and will "publish" all the messages via the internet. The public will therefore also be able to contribute from any internet linked computer.

The upcoming election also provides a rare opportunity. Local schools will be able to build the activity into their citizenship, ICT, History, Geography and/or cross-curricular literacy curricula. Local community groups will also be able to provide a representative voice for their members.

In this way, the contribution period will culminate in a town "event" on a Saturday afternoon. This might take the form of a local personality standing at the screen inviting final votes on key issues, while the local MP and/or a representative panel discuss the contributions. What we

are looking for here is a sense that the contributions have been heard and have informed the people's understanding and perspective (which is not the same as saying that the council does what the comments ask for...). This could even provide the basis for a "public dialogue" hosted by champion of this, Tony Benn himself!

### **Proposed timeline**

Significant foundational work has been achieved in advance of the original pilot event. (please see appendices) The work of setting up the SMS server, designing the moderator's and discussion pages, along with designing a draft website and leaflets can all be picked up easily early next year. The time spent talking with community groups and establishing a list of contacts has also been well spent. We suggest that we meet with the council and inteGREAT management committees early in the New Year, to present the project and clarify any questions. We anticipate setting up a small agile working group that meets regularly to mobilize resources and plan the project detail further in time for the upcoming election.

### **What our Great Yarmouth project partners can bring**

The impact and significance of this project can be greatly extended by effective project partnership and a tight project team. Beyond the community support already described, the following can make this project truly exemplary.

- A Great Yarmouth event organiser who co-ordinates the town square event, including the panel, publicity, MC, possibly a stage and music, as well as building a collaborative relationship with local radio stations
- An effective partnership with the council so that the project can be designed to assist in the delivery of their e-governance objectives,
- The use of resources including a booth for the town square, loan of mobile phones with sim cards.
- Technical support, in the form of wireless networking,
- Sponsorship for the event and flyers, as well as project extension,
- Agility and enthusiasm from the local screen service provider,
- A lively panel, for consultation on project design in the context of the project objectives as most relevant to the needs and aspirations of the local community, business and council.
- A facilitator, probably a local personality with genuine enthusiasm for the project objectives.
- Volunteers for moderating the contributions on a rota, (and co-research regarding what the pattern of participation is),
- Volunteers as e-moderators and co-researchers,
- Business sponsorship for additional costs incurred.

## **What Microsoft brings**

Microsoft is passionate about how technology can improve people's lives. There is a real need to engage people, especially young people, in the democratic process. We would like other areas to hear about what has been achieved here as a stimulus for developing their own ideas. We are also interested in working with Ultralab on this project as we have great admiration for their ideas, passion and enthusiasm around the application of technology.

## **What Ultralab brings**

Ultralab is based at APU Chelmsford, and has a multiskilled team, which can contribute across a variety of domains including research, technical, project management and design. It is anticipated that for the current project, our focus will be on a) consulting and designing the conceptual design b) the research design, analysis and write up, as well as filling any gaps.

Other Lab team skills available to the project include project management, DVD production, facilitating video “summer schools” (assisting people to use digital technology to make videos), web design and technical skills training ie working with groups to assist them to learn to stream video, send SMS to the screen, compress video etc.

ULTRALAB has also accrued extensive relevant e-democracy experience. We have generated dialogue between politicians, government officials and participants via hotseats that have influenced policy design via online communities, designed and run “Domesday” style projects such as Tesco SchoolNet 2000, and taken projects from scaled pilots through to fully implemented national projects eg Talking Heads which has led to the full scale integration of learning communities into school leadership development via the National College of School Leadership and Notschool.net, a programme for long term excluded students now rolling out across the UK.

## **Intellectual property**

Ultralab is a research and development organization. This research project is funded by Microsoft. We want to pilot a methodology to build e-democracy that can be tested in other towns, with the aim of further researching and developing a model sufficiently robust to be scaled nationally. We would retain the rights to publish our research findings, and wish to be credited alongside all project partners in all publicity. APU requires that IP issues be clearly defined at the outset.

## **Partnership**

ULTRALAB has more than sixteen years experience in generating delightful and empowering learning through the practice of reflective and participative action research. This is achieved through scaffolding learners to use ICT as tools for learning within engaging and relevant contexts. Participant's feedback informs the next iteration of development ensuring that our projects are effective, relevant and continue to evolve. It is our practice to keep our management structure as flat as possible and to use collaborative dialogue with all stakeholders to generate robust relationships.

## **Possible future developments - Great Yarmouth video and picture stories**

Ultralab's experience in empowering young people to use video has given us a strong resonance with SeaChange's work of involving community groups in capturing their stories for presentation on the "town screen". We are very interested in supporting this work and researching the process if funding can be found to support this. On the one hand, it would be interesting to know whether capturing video stories is empowering members of the community to take a more active interest and role in their community. It would also be interesting to explore the degree to which participants are prepared to participate more actively in the democratic process by highlighting local issues and perhaps even proposing solutions.

There is the possibility here of community members researching their issues a little and thereby feeling more engaged in the political process, whilst also gaining confidence with the new technologies. A simple way to do this is through assisting members of the public to capture digital photograph sequences about their topic and juxtaposing or complementing this with ticker tape commentary. This could provide a chance for the Great Yarmouth community to enter into a conversation about a variety of topics with each other, right there in the town square.

## **The bottom line**

Technology allows us to do things in different ways but arguably we haven't begun to use it effectively in democracy yet. This project provides the opportunity to extend the boundaries and to contribute to addressing democratisation, arguably the key "hot" issue of our time.

The following appendices document the work completed for the original November 04 pilot and are indicative.

### Appendix A: The draft website design

(a screen like this would be available via the [www.gylargescreen.com](http://www.gylargescreen.com))

# e-talk

[Messages](#)

[Vote](#)

[Statistics](#)



## How can we make our town Great ?

Please text us your ideas from your mobile phone. The best suggestions will be shown on the town centre screen at different times during the day. You can also add your suggestions via this website.



**Text us with your message on:**  
**07840 036 883**

**Please prefix your text message with the letters GY**

**e.g. gy lets run a teambuilding workshop for everyone!**  
**Text messages should cost no more than 12p per SMS message**

[Ultralab](#)

[Seachange](#)



On Saturday, 27th November, 2004, our panel of experts will dicuss your suggestions in the town square, and you'll have a chance to vote for your favourite. The best ideas will be awarded a prize.



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## Appendix B: A draft web voting page

It is relatively simple to provide anonymous polls via the internet



**Links to other pages**

- [Home](#)
- [Previous messages](#)
- [Back to e-talk](#)
- [Stats](#)
- [Current Messages](#)

You can also send a message by typing in the box below

# e-talk

## Have your say!

**Q1:** What music would you like to hear in the town square?  
A: best loved dance tunes  B: rock and roll  C: light classical

**Q2:** Why do you live here?  
A: Work  B: Sea  C: Born here  D: Holiday

**Q3:** What new skill would you like to learn?  
A: making a story video   
B: becoming a local history researcher   
C: how to text from my mobile:   
D: how to teach a skill to others

**Q4:** What do you think about swapping the Pound for the Euro?  
A Great idea!  B: Don't know, want to learn more  C: Don't care  D Big mistake!

### Appendix C: The draft message page

Functioning but still “unskinned” and date and time unformatted, this page would be accessed via the [www.gylargescreen.com/e-democracy](http://www.gylargescreen.com/e-democracy) pages. Currently it can be accessed via <http://nottinghill.ultralab.net/edemocracy/jsps/> then click on the Messages link

You are viewing the e-Democracy SMS messages.



You can send your text messages using any mobile phone to this number: 07840 036 883. Please prefix your message with gy, e.g. gy Texting is great

Messages
2004-11-19:15:03:56 I'd like to hear more about our local history.
2004-11-19:15:00:38 lets have more live music
2004-11-19:14:57:56 more places for young people to hang out
2004-11-19:14:56:47 Perhaps we could run a free community learning exchange in the park from time to time?
2004-11-19:14:56:15 Some open top tour busses would be great
2004-11-19:14:55:48 It would be good to use us old folks as tour guides
2004-11-19:14:53:43 Could we have a cover partly over the ocean, partly over the beach, heated with solar heating, so that people can use the beach longer?
Enter your comment in the text area below.
<input type="text"/>
<input type="button" value="Submit Comment"/>
<a href="#">GET MORE MESSAGES</a>

Appendix D: The draft skin for the message page

 <p><b>Links to other pages</b></p> <p><a href="#">Home</a></p> <p><a href="#">Previous messages</a></p> <p><a href="#">Back to e-talk</a></p> <p><a href="#">Stats</a></p> <p>Voting</p> <p>You can also send a message by typing in the box below</p>	<h1>e-talk</h1>
	<h2>Latest Messages</h2>
	<b>How can we make Yarmouth Greater?</b>
	11th Nov 2004; 15:56
	I'd like to hear more about our local history.
	11th Nov 2004; 15:57
	I'm happy to run a free community team building event
11th Nov 2004; 15:58	
Could we have a cover, partly over the beach, partly over the water, heated with solar heating so that people can use the beach longer?	
11th Nov 2004; 16:00	
it would be good to use us old folk as tour guides.	

**Appendix E: The moderation login**

<http://nottinghill.ultralab.net/edemocracy/jsps/Login.jsp>

username leonie password leonie

this would be accessed via the [www.gylargescreen.com/e-democracy](http://www.gylargescreen.com/e-democracy) pages

**Welcome to the e-Democracy website**

Admin login	
Username:	<input type="text" value="leonie"/>
Password:	<input type="password" value="*****"/>
<input type="button" value="Sign in"/>	

'e-Democracy' is a collaboration between Great Yarmouth Borough Council, Microsoft, SeaChange Trust and Ultralab, funded by Microsoft. The software has been developed by Ultralab

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**Appendix F: The moderation pages**

A check box to flag that messages have been cleared for large screen display is still to be added.

<b>Messages</b>	
2004-11-19:15:03:56	
I'd like to hear more about our local history.	<a href="#">Delete Message</a>
2004-11-19:15:00:38	
lets have more live music	<a href="#">Delete Message</a>
2004-11-19:14:57:56	
more places for young people to hang out	<a href="#">Delete Message</a>
2004-11-19:14:56:47	
Perhaps we could run a free community learning exchange in the park from time to time?	<a href="#">Delete Message</a>
2004-11-19:14:56:15	
Some open top tour busses would be great	<a href="#">Delete Message</a>
<a href="#">GET MORE MESSAGES</a>	

Appendix G: The draft event flyer and poster design

**E-DEMOCRACY**  
LET'S MAKE YARMOUTH GREAT

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A CHANCE TO FIND OUT HOW WE CAN USE THE BIG SCREEN TO TALK ABOUT MAKING YARMOUTH GREAT.

**HOW DO YOU JOIN IN?**  
TEXT A MESSAGE TO THE BIG SCREEN (10P) AND IT WILL AUTOMATICALLY APPEAR ON OUR WEBSITE TOO.

**WHEN IS IT HAPPENING?**  
FROM THE 22<sup>ND</sup> - 27<sup>TH</sup> OF NOVEMBER, THE FINAL EVENT AT 2.00PM ON THE 27<sup>TH</sup> IN YARMOUTH TOWN SQUARE.

**WHAT DO YOU NEED?**  
A MOBILE PHONE.  
CALL 07849 500 410

**IF YOU DON'T HAVE A MOBILE PHONE?**  
THEN YOU CAN ENTER YOUR MESSAGE ON OUR WEBSITE.  
[BIGSCREENCY.COM/E-DEMOCRACY](http://BIGSCREENCY.COM/E-DEMOCRACY)

**INTERESTED IN MAKING A DIFFERENCE?**

ULTRALAB **Microsoft** SeaChange Trust Great Yarmouth Borough Council