

## Challenging the Norms and Standards of Election Administration: Election Management Bodies and Use of the Internet\*

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\*Chapter published in *Challenging the Norms and Standards of Election Administration* (IFES, 2007), p. 21-33.

### I. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to establish new proposals for international electoral standards<sup>1</sup> for the use of the Internet during election campaigns (outside of voting).

Election administrators and governments need to decide how they will use the Internet to improve election processes and better inform voters in the near term regardless of the complexity and controversy surrounding Internet voting. As has been seen in elections around the world, the influence of the Internet is growing.

The recommendations<sup>2</sup> proposed in this paper attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How should the Internet be used to support better election processes and informed voting?
2. What content and services must be online to ensure free and fair elections?

The emerging role of the Internet surrounding elections deserves close attention. It may be that changes in campaigning and citizen action online, rather than e-voting, present the real opportunities for—or challenges to—democratic transformation.

Once documented and shared, best practices can bring existing democratic freedoms and electoral standards to life where applied. However, while most election-related benefits from online activities will be gained through best practices, a standards-established model for "must-have" and "should-have" online elements is proposed. As more citizens come online, electoral management bodies (EMBs) will see their online responsibilities increase. Clearly, these responsibilities will arrive sooner in "wired" countries with active online populations, but they will eventually arrive everywhere. Creating a shared body of best practices now can benefit all democracies over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Key documents establishing "electoral standards" include International IDEA's "International Electoral Standards: Guidelines for reviewing the legal framework of elections" ([http://www.idea.int/publications/electoral\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.idea.int/publications/electoral_guidelines.pdf)) and the OSCE's "Existing Commitments for Democratic Elections in OSCE Participating States" (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/?page=publications&div=topics&topic=elections>). These documents extensively reference the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm>), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and related treaties (<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/intlinst.htm>), and the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development (<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/wssd/agreements>).

<sup>2</sup> As intended, the recommendations in this paper are proposed exclusively by the author, Steven Clift. This paper contains updates from January 2007.

## **II. Two Proposed Internet-Era Electoral Standards**

Two key proposals for information-age electoral standards deserve special attention and debate. They inform all of the recommendations below:

1. All information produced, compiled, disseminated, or disclosed to hold a democratic election as established by national laws and international electoral standards must be **publicly accessible** on the Internet in a standard, authoritative format.
2. **Voter privacy** must be established to cover all voter actions online (seeking information about political candidates and issues; communicating with family, friends, and members of private associations about elections or governance; and voting).

The need for the first standard is intuitive. In order to build trust in the electoral process, promote voter participation, encourage informed voting, and ensure legal compliance, EMBs must make public all information about election standards, laws, regulations, and voter education programs. In addition, existing electoral standards require broad and timely access to this information. It is almost impossible to conceive of any democratic purpose served by keeping such information offline.

The second proposed standard opens an area of great debate. The Internet era provides many ways to track individual behavior; however, to ensure continued participation in the electoral system, voters must feel they can freely explore the raw materials of political thought without fearing public exposure by those with state, media, or economic power.

## **III. Analysis and Recommendations**

Based on a review of the Web sites of EMBs and other sites with election and campaign information, the following section outlines policy recommendations in regard to:

- Providing information online
- Establishing an online legal environment
- Monitoring the Internet media
- Ensuring technological access

### **1. Providing Information Online**

A typical EMB Web site should provide extensive access to official government election-related content. The “any time, anywhere” Internet makes election information more accessible now than at any time in history, and is therefore a force for democratization.

#### **a. Make content available online**

Ideally, all public election material—text, images, audio/video, voting information, and educational content—produced by EMBs should be available online.<sup>3</sup> However, given

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<sup>3</sup> Items not available online should be described there and directions given for how to access them offline.

the variation in EMBs' resources and in online populations across countries, a progression of Internet use for EMBs should be defined and benchmarked.

### **Must-have elements**

For all countries, the items below represent basic items that create democratic legitimacy, regardless of the number of citizens who use the Internet.

- ***Content demonstrating electoral standards are in action***

Any public information mentioned in existing electoral standards must be made available (and easy to locate) online in a timely manner.

- ***Accurate and authoritative content***

Even in the most wired countries, governments often place disclaimers on their Web sites suggesting that they are not responsible for the accuracy of the information there. Such disclaimers undermine legitimacy and trust in the electoral process. EMBs must guarantee that their Web sites provide legally accurate and authoritative information.

- ***Multilingual content***

As required by local law, all content on an EMB's Web site must be available in all official languages. Other relevant languages should be used when possible.

### **Should-have elements**

If "must-have" content establishes legitimacy, trust, and free and fair elections, "should-have" content and services promote voter participation, service transaction convenience for regulated political groups and voters, and other benefits. As more people in a given country go online, the benefit as well as the justification for investment increases. Countries with fewer than 20 percent of the population online may decide to invest gradually in this second tier of online services. On the other hand, in countries where more than 50 percent of the population is online, it is proposed that "should-have" items become "must-have" items.

- ***Candidate and party lists/links***

EMBs should provide voters with complete and up-to-date access to "who is on my ballot" and "where do I vote?" online look-up tools. Providing such data at low or no cost for use by others, including major media Web sites, will make this high demand information accessible when voters seek it. Further, EMBs should maintain an official registry of candidate and party Web sites and e-mail addresses. Such a registry allows citizens to locate official (not spoofed) political Web sites and to reliably gather information from multiple sources online. Laws or regulations that require candidates or parties to link their Web sites (and their campaign finance or ethics filings) to the official registry should be considered.

- ***Voter registration***

If EMBs can meet the challenge of electronically verifying identities, they can allow voter registration online, or at least registration address changes. If they do not have the capability to verify identities, they could allow online transactions by verifying e-mail addresses following a transaction and providing clear warnings of the penalties for fraud. As is done in New Zealand, governments should allow voters to verify online their information as it appears in the electoral rolls.

Alternatively, first-time electronic registration or name changes could be conducted by organizations that meet certain standards. In the future, regulated political

entities and civil society groups may use Tablet PCs or handheld devices that have the ability to collect electronic written signatures. This process would require security procedures, privacy guarantees, and penalties that ensure the signatures collected are not used for other purposes.

- ***Campaign finance reporting and disclosure system***

EMBs should provide full online access to all legally public campaign finance data collected online. This public data should be searchable and downloadable for analysis with third-party tools. The data fields to be released electronically, like postal addresses of campaign donors, may be limited by privacy laws. EMBs could further expand into real-time reporting and disclosure of certain expenditures/donations over a certain amount. They could also create an online register of political campaign advertising in both the mass and online media (including paid “advertorials” on blogs, forums, etc., which should but often do not have required “paid and prepared for” statements). The full potential of the disclosure approach to regulating or limiting undesirable election behavior through public awareness will only be realized through online access.<sup>4</sup>

- ***Voter outreach and education programs***<sup>5</sup>

Judging by the information available, EMBs’ online content appears to be used primarily by election officials, candidates/parties, the media, and regulated political entities. As EMBs make more information available, they should reach out to targeted groups to increase voter use of their materials. South Korea provides the most extensive example of such activity to date. An international exchange could help EMBs, media organizations (particularly public broadcasters), and nonpartisan organizations that educate voters to document the outreach practices that best achieve the most democratic results.

Given its highly interactive nature, the Internet also provides a rich opportunity to increase the political participation of young people. However, a CIRCLE survey<sup>6</sup> in the United States suggests that the Internet should complement rather than replace offline efforts. The web is a “pull” medium, where users decide what content to view. While you can entice people to visit a page through online advertising or “tell a friend” viral online marketing, disengaged youth are less likely to choose to view online political content. Active research that fully documents best practices, and EMB, NGO and media projects that build on those best practices would greatly benefit strategic investments in targeted voter outreach and education online.

EMBs should develop an index of online information products used for voter education, particularly those covered by existing electoral standards. EMBs can also prioritize content development by using specific case studies. In addition, they should map out and analyze the associated costs and benefits with checklists to guide development. However, providing online access does not absolve an EMB of the responsibility to disseminate information via traditional methods.

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<sup>4</sup> For a related discussion, see the final section of this report for Dr. Marcin Walecki’s discussion of *Political Finance*, p.75 -93.

<sup>5</sup> The ACE Project Web site, an information resource on election administration, details voter education options and provides sample content at <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/ve>. I will not repeat its important work and detailed advice.

<sup>6</sup> See CIRCLE, “National Youth Survey 2004” (January 15, 2004). Information about the survey is available at [http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/national\\_youth\\_survey2004.htm](http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/national_youth_survey2004.htm).

- **Services and searches**

Citizens prefer voting information that is tailored to their geographical location or political interests, and EMBs can easily provide services based on geography, such as locating candidates or elected officials by area. (Media and NGO voter education sites will more likely take the lead with political issues.)

- **Campaign regulation information and notifications**

EMBs have a special opportunity to provide tailored services to regulated political organizations, including full and reliable disclosure of all election laws, regulations, and policies. Online education and personalized notification services (such as e-mail alerts on deadlines or regulation tracking) will contribute to improved compliance and convenience.

## **b. Make content accessible online**

Accessibility is a cornerstone issue and opportunity for EMBs. Specifically, access should be guaranteed for:

- **People with disabilities**

EMBs have a democratic obligation to become a model of compliance with e-government accessibility policies. They must make rigorous use of standard HTML and other technologies that ensure greater access for sight-impaired people. In addition, they should use closed captioning of audio/video content for those who are hearing impaired.

- **Speakers of minority languages**

EMBs should consider providing essential voter information in all local languages. A great advantage of the Web is its ability to provide access to alternative language content in areas of a country where an EMB may not target print distribution.

- **Users of different Internet interfaces**

In order to reach the greatest number of citizens, EMBs should organize their content for users of different Internet interfaces. The use of database-driven content management systems and standard content formatting (such as HTML, XML, CSS, RSS, etc.) make this task significantly easier, as does the ability to produce low- and high-bandwidth versions of pages. An emerging area is mobile access (often called WAP), which allows users to view the Web via their mobile phones.

- **Users without computer access**

EMBs may actually achieve better voter outreach by using offline as well as online resources. This is particularly true in countries with limited home Internet access or displaced people. As more and more institutions (from NGOs to political parties to schools) become connected, the Internet can be used as a remote document storage system. This will be particularly useful for achieving the timely distribution of information flyers and small format posters in places where postal service is unreliable. The Internet could also be used to distribute radio programs in MP3 format for use by local radio stations. (See the section on **Ensuring Technological Access** below for further discussion of increasing access to voter information in the most remote places.)

## **2. Establishing an Online Legal Environment**

The regulation of online campaign activity is one of the most complicated areas of online election administration.<sup>7</sup> Moving from analysis and proposals to the approval of new laws or rules on this issue has proved exceedingly difficult. However, this may be a good thing. EMBs need experience with the Internet to determine which aspects of campaign regulations are either threatened or enhanced by its use.

However, some individuals and informal groups may use the Internet to exercise influence on par with regulated political groups. The reaction to this event will range from government attempts to regulate individual behavior to calls by regulated groups for Internet campaigning exemptions. A proposed amendment to legislation on Internet taxes in the U.S. House of Representatives that would have exempted Internet campaigning from election regulations failed. Parliaments around the world will need to carefully consider future regulation of online campaigning.

### **a. Identify applicable laws**

In light of today's Internet-driven realities, EMBs must review existing campaign regulatory laws and issue clear guidance. When possible, they should apply to Internet content those laws that currently regulate offline media. However in many areas, EMBs should fundamentally re-evaluate laws and regulations and develop proposals that allow the Internet to contribute positively to democracy. Achieving the original goals of electoral regulations may require that those regulations be repealed in the face of the opportunity afforded by the Internet. There will be instances in which the application of existing "offline" laws may lead to civil or criminal charges for what is considered "normal" **online** campaign or political activity. Further, when it comes to the activities of individual citizens, these may require exemptions for specific activities online and offline in order to make enforcement practical.

### **b. Establish privacy policies, review proposal for "voter privacy" standard**

The proposed "voter privacy" election standard extends the concept of voter privacy while voting to include political privacy while gathering information to make a considered vote. This proposal requires extensive review in all countries. Initial recommendations include the requirement that all regulated political entities should be required to develop, display, and adhere to privacy policies. EMBs should develop a standard template for display on election-related Web sites, providing a checklist of what may and what will not be done with the information generated by an individual's use of the site. The establishment of such a policy will be highly controversial as political organizations' use of data on supporters is typically not made public. Any registered political entity that violates its own privacy policy should be subject to severe legal penalties, and all changes in organizations' privacy policies should be registered with the EMB. In addition, all individuals currently in that organization's database should be notified of the changes and given the opportunity to opt out. Alternatively, or in addition, a country's law could specify allowable privacy and data-sharing practices.

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<sup>7</sup> The U.K.'s Electoral Commission has produced both discussion papers and recommendations on the topic of election campaigning and the Internet, which are available from this page (scroll down to find relevant section) <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/policyreviews.cfm>. The U.S. Federal Election Commission has also explored this issue, creating several regulations related to use of the Internet in 2006 (see <http://www.fec.gov/pages/brochures/internetcomm.shtml>). California's Fair Political Practices Commission has also addressed the issue (see <http://www.fppc.ca.gov/index.html?id=362>).

**c. Provide defamation and libel guidelines**

As laws related to online libel and defamation differ from country to country, EMBs should compile all relevant local laws and provide citizens, candidates, and parties with guidance on how to avoid associated legal penalties. The 1999 United Nations Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Protection and Promotion of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression<sup>8</sup> illustrates how easily citizens could be charged with criminal libel in democratic countries that view informal online remarks to friends on par with statements on television or in the newspaper.

**d. Protect the right to freedom of expression, assembly online, and the use of information**

Through the Internet, the power of national and international freedom of expression guarantees are gaining their full effect. In short, all human and democratic rights apply online as they do in person or in traditional media. It is essential that those promoting free and fair elections advocate for the ability of citizens to exercise their established rights online, including the right to online public/private communication, association, and assembly in the election process. The legal private communication among people must not be monitored for the sake of “free and fair” elections. Finally, as governments, political parties, and candidates make information about elections available online, voters should have a clearly articulated right to use, share, and comment on such information.

**e. Guarantee the right of reply online**

In some countries, newspapers and broadcast media are obliged to provide equal time for all candidates; more specifically, they must do so for a candidate who has been the focus of criticism. Similar policies could also be implemented on the Internet, where Web site owners might be required to carry a response from someone who is the subject of comments on the site. Such policies have been discussed little in the United States; however, the Council of Europe has explored the application of the right of reply in online media.<sup>9</sup>

Whether voluntary or mandatory, guaranteeing the right of reply might provide a less litigious mechanism to correct the record. Most Web forums allow people to reply to other comments, and some news sites allow people to annotate a story by attaching their comments to it. However, the abuse of government-sanctioned reporting mechanisms must be monitored, because the legal and personal costs related to frivolous complaints might have a chilling effect on the exercise of free expression during elections.

**3. Monitoring Internet Media**

Because the Internet is an increasingly agenda-setting medium, it will become important to independently monitor media and other significant Web sites during elections in order to ensure fair and balanced coverage.<sup>10</sup> While the Internet does not yet reach as many

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<sup>8</sup> Available from <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/7/b/mfro.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.humanrights.coe.int/media/events/2003/Hearing.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> The National Democratic Institute mentions the Internet briefly in its media monitoring guide: NDI, “Media Monitoring to Promote Democratic Elections,” (NDI, 2002). Available at [http://www.accessdemocracy.org/library/1420\\_elect\\_media\\_02.pdf](http://www.accessdemocracy.org/library/1420_elect_media_02.pdf).

citizens as television, its reach will only grow. Therefore, select parts of the Internet, particularly major media sites, should be integrated into any media monitoring effort.

**a. Build from academic online content analysis techniques**

While the democratic purposes of online monitoring emanate from traditional media monitoring, current online analysis expertise comes from the world of academic Internet research. According to Dr. Kirsten Foot at the University of Washington, she advises the following:

- Build from online content analysis;
- Define clearly what is being monitored (a Web site, site section, article, a page, forum, e-mail newsletter, etc.);
- Use a tool like "Teleport Pro" to harvest information from sites (perhaps selecting specific times of each hour or each day to check selected pages);
- Create a standard questionnaire for use by monitors; and
- Use a web-based reporting tool with a database backend (like Webarchivist Coder), because it may work better than an Excel spreadsheet for coding.<sup>11</sup>

As reporting systems on election-related media monitoring are often designed with weekly reporting in mind, fair and balanced reporting should be promoted by streamlining analysis and measuring essential content.

**b. Monitor the top 100 Web sites**

Independently monitor and report on the "surface" pages of the top 100 Web sites carrying news or political content in a given country. Such monitoring will involve a mix of traffic comparison, objective metrics, and commonsense evaluation. This reporting should also cover major portals even if they have limited political content.

It is recommended that an independent designee or research institution monitor the stories or content linked from a site's home page, the top sections (e.g. news, business, etc.), and any special election or political sections. The key is to focus on the parts of the top 100 sites that could influence a general reader (e.g., CNN's home page or MSN Messenger's welcome page). While some automatic content analysis tools might be used to complement staff or volunteer analysis, online media monitoring will remain labor intensive.

**c. Research political Web trends**

Monitoring and analysis of opinion leader sites, forums, and e-mail lists are also recommended. Such monitoring will help establish how information travels online or how online rumors are picked up by the mass media. Based on its experience in this area, an EMB or other nonpartisan organizations could offer regular reports on its media monitoring as well as resources to correct the factual record online. The goal would be to highlight the diverse sources of information available online and to demonstrate alternative, non-regulatory mechanisms for creating accountability. Presenting a slightly different model, the U.S.-based FactCheck.Org corrects

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<sup>11</sup> For details on "web research methods" see: <http://www.com.washington.edu/Program/Faculty/Faculty/foot.html> Information on Teleport Pro is available from: <http://www.tenmax.com>.



politicians' statements in a model that could grow into a project that could post corrections to forums or weblogs on agenda-setting political sites.

**d. Monitor government Web sites**

EMBs should monitor all top-level government Web sites, such as the government's home page, the parliament's home page, and authorized sites of officials running for re-election.<sup>12</sup> In addition, EMBs should look for inappropriate redirection or links to campaign Web sites, which would likely violate election laws. EMBs (or perhaps national libraries) are the government agencies that should link to political party and candidate Web sites, and they must do so in a balanced, uniform way. During elections, all e-government Web sites should link the EMB site in order to alert citizens online that elections are coming.

**e. Encourage watchdog groups to aid policy development**

While the Global Internet Liberty Campaign ([www.gilc.org](http://www.gilc.org)) and Internews ([www.internews.org](http://www.internews.org)) both promote global freedom of expression via the Internet, it is important that EMBs encourage the establishment of national groups that can report on the situations in their own countries. Watchdog groups like Reporters without Borders cover issues of Internet freedom<sup>13</sup> from the perspective of the media, but few groups examine the situation from the perspective of clean campaigning. EMBs and parliaments need information about the obstacles and successes people encounter on the Internet in order to develop good Internet policy.

**4. Ensuring Technological Access**

Because most developing democracies are also developing countries with limited telecommunications infrastructure, it is easy to dismiss the role of the Internet in such countries. However, it is in these countries that the strategic use of the Internet may actually provide the greatest efficiencies and benefits. A key to lower costs is the ability to avoid expensive satellite Internet connections. It is essential to find ways to share costs and connections when satellite or expensive direct connections are the only options available.

Many EMBs around the world are nearing the final stages of integrating technologically advanced Web sites and online services into election administration. The more interactive an electoral administration is within its own offices, the better prepared it will be to deal with the public and online policy issues. In the poorest countries, funding support for an EMB's strategic online infrastructure is recommended.

**a. E-mail**

All employees of an EMB should have an e-mail account and e-mail access via a Web browser. They should be able to access their accounts outside their office and in remote locations. In many developing countries, staff share computer workstations. It is also important to note in many instances, e-mail is easier to access in remote regions than telephones or postal services. Using the Internet to send short text

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<sup>12</sup> Such government-funded sites should be required to link to EMB-produced voting information and should be encouraged to link to other nonpartisan election resources.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, their section on governments' use of the Internet and treatment of journalists who write online: [http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=273](http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=273).

messages (SMS) is a bridging technology where mobile phones are often more accessible than landlines.

#### **b. Wireless Internet options**

The following technologies should be reviewed for their potential to provide e-mail/Internet access to election officials and other democratic actors (such as candidates, political parties, NGOs, community radio stations, etc.):

- ***E-mail via radio***

There are places around the world that send and receive e-mail via HF Radio/Shortwave E-mail, which allows them to communicate at a lower cost than when using a satellite. While there are initial equipment costs and the data transfer rate is very slow, such connections provide e-mail access in some of the remotest areas of Africa and other developing countries.<sup>14</sup>

- ***Low-earth satellites, satellite connections***

These low-earth satellites rotate around the earth providing an opportunity for daily e-mail exchange. Additional research is required to determine where this technology is being used. While expensive, the fixed and mobile satellite connection options increase and costs decrease each year.<sup>15</sup>

- ***Wi-Fi (802.11b/g) and other line-of-sight wireless technologies like WiMax***

These wireless technologies are being used in creative ways around the world. A satellite link to a community access “telecenter” might be shared in a village via Wi-Fi. In Cambodia, Wi-Fi is placed on motorcycles, which enables the delivery and uploading of e-mail from schools, clinics, and other locations as they drive past. Upon returning to their base office, which has a satellite Internet connection, the devices on the motorcycles pass outgoing messages on to the Internet.

#### **c. Localized content access**

Prior to an election, essential voting information, election law guides, and voter participation posters should be compiled and distributed to EMB staff, the media, political parties/candidates, election observers, NGOs, and others electronically. This content can be made available via CD-ROM or one-way satellite radio with data interfaces<sup>16</sup> to NGOs (and other organizations serving displaced persons), who can mirror the content on local computers for local access and printing on demand.

#### **d. Pilot open source tools for election administration and voter guides**

If EMBs and the democratic development community focus sufficient political will and resources, the Internet can be used aggressively in even the least wired countries to promote free and fair elections. Two or three countries should be selected for in-depth pilot efforts using sharable open source software. The creation of tools, like a platform

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<sup>14</sup> For a good video on radio e-mail, see the site of Radio E-Mail Connections Unlimited at <http://www.radiomail1.net>. Another example is found at <http://www.bushmail.net>.

<sup>15</sup> For details on satellite Internet options in developing countries see HumaniNet’s site on satellite communications, available at <http://www.humaninet.org/wis/satcom/index.shtml>.

<sup>16</sup> One-way satellite content distribution is an option that has been used to deliver community radio content in Asia and Africa. See First Voice International’s site for more information: <http://www.firstvoiceint.org/How/Satellite.html>.

for generating non-partisan voter guides by EMBs, civil society, or media (depending upon local roles) could be used in scores of jurisdictions and languages quickly. Overall, leveraging existing open source tools with election administration-related “code” or modules will generate the most cost-effective value. This requires support for the idea that shared tools should serve the needs of more than one EMB and acceptance that they may replace or complement existing administrative technology systems.

## **V. Conclusion**

The legitimacy of modern governance is based on free and fair elections. The new capacities of information and communication technologies, including the Internet, require election laws, rules and practices be updated to ensure that democratic electoral goals are met in the information age. This will be a difficult process due to the speed at which innovations—both good and bad—emerge in the networked world. Let all of us seize this challenge with democratic intent now, so that in a decade, we will not regret a missed opportunity to shape the information age for democratic good.

By gaining practical Internet experience, EMBs can take advantage of the democratic potential of the information age. By focusing on electoral standards and democratic principles, EMBs can leverage the strengths of the information age, counter its negative aspects, and protect and strengthen democracy for generations to come.

### **Further Readings and Select Bibliography**

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