The present invention relates to voting systems, and more particularly to network-based voting systems. Aspects of the present invention relate to systems, devices, computer-implemented methods, computer programs stored on a computer-readable medium, and signals for use in such network-based voting systems. Embodyments of the present invention motivate new users to join the system, and stimulate existing and new users to use the system more.
START

TRANSMIT

USER-SPECIFIC
RANKING INFORMATION
TO USER

END

FIGURE 4
Figure 5

---+447763688391---
Top opinion rank:
64/563
Votes Rec'd: 158
vativation.com
Options Back
Dear Joe

Your Rankings:

4/19/21
Votes Rec'd: 3:42

Options  Back
START

160

OBTAIN TERMINAL-EQUIPMENT IDENTIFICATION DATA FROM TERMINAL EQUIPMENT OF A PERSON

IDENTIFY PERSON AS A REGISTERED USER IN DEPENDENCE UPON THE TERMINAL-EQUIPMENT IDENTIFICATION DATA ALONE

END

FIGURE 7
START

APPORTION SHARE OF REVENUES TO A
FIRST USER

WAS FIRST USER INTRODUCED BY A SECOND USER?

YES

APPORTION A PART OF SHARE TO SECOND USER

END

NO

Figure 9
Welcome to Votivation

Votivation is an evolution in social networking, an evolution in democratic services.

Meet me now

Will they? Won't they?

Opinion of the day

Dalorno - £41108.0

Major reform in schools is not necessary. Pupils from poorer backgrounds could lose out under a two-tier, class-ridden system.

We need to have more cycle paths going further from the university and especially on roads where they don’t even have a walk way.

The plans to merge the 43 police forces in England and Wales into as few as 12 large forces would be hugely disruptive.

Christmas is definitely not as much fun as you get older.

Dalorno - £41108.0
Register

To enjoy Votivation's innovative community and services please register below for FREE.

Only your Display Name (white) is shown to other users; all other information is kept confidential. Cell/mobile phone number is required in case you wish to order/download Votivation's unique mobile content (eg ranking alerts, etc.), send text messages to other users or if we need to contact you urgently to make a prize award - you will NOT receive any spam/junk premium rate texts or anything like that. All fields are required except Optional. Please see our Privacy Policy for further details.

Display name

First name

Last name

Email

Cell/mobile

Date of birth

Day [ ] Month [ ] Year [ ]

Password

Confirm password

Country

United Kingdom

How did you hear about Votivation?

After clicking the Register button below, we'll send you:

- an activation e-mail... with a personalised activation link which YOU MUST CLICK;

and after checking/reconfirming your details briefly

- a FREE SMS text welcoming message containing a keyword... please REPLY (using your given keyword) to complete registration.

This process reduces spam/junk account creation and helps ensure voting and prize award security/identification.

By clicking the "Register" button below I confirm I have read and agree to the Votivation Terms of Service.
Set profile: Spooky 121

Welcome.
Before proceeding further, let the world know a little more about you and what you stand for (you can also change this stuff later if you wish).

My loves & hates
What are you passionate about? What makes your blood boil? Let the world know here. Just list each item, separated by a comma (eg cats, dogs, my kids, football.)

I love
I hate

If I ruled the World...
Now summarise briefly "what would YOU do if you ruled the world" (lets everyone know where you stand, what your biggest issue is, how you'd like things to improve - be honest, creative and courageous)

If I ruled the world I'd...

My charity
By selecting from the simple options below you can raise money for your favourite charity and have your donation increased by the Inland Revenue through Gift Aid. You may also qualify for additional UK tax relief.

When your Volition cash account total reaches the normal payment minimum (£25) just click "Request Cash Payment" button in the "My account" section.

We will notify you of your payment by email (enabling you to claim back tax on your annual return).
(Don't see your favourite charity in the list below? Please email us)

Step 1 - Select the % of your Volition account balance you wish to allocate to your preferred charity

Step 2 - Select your Supported Charity

Step 3 - Obtain Gift Aid UK Tax Relief and add up to 28.2% extra through Gift Aid

If you are a higher rate taxpayer, you can claim relief on the difference between the basic rate and higher rate of tax. If you do not pay UK tax, you should not use Gift Aid.

I declare that I want my charity gift to be treated as a Gift Aid donation:
(Please check this to enable your preferred charity to benefit from Gift Aid)
My account: Spooky 121

Name: Bob Challenger
Email address: bob@eskimohotel.com
Mobile no.: 07777 777 777
Date of birth: 14/07/1978
Date joined: 23/11/2005
Referred by: Spooky 120

My charity

By selecting from the simple options below you can raise money for your favourite charity and have your donation increased by the Inland Revenue through Gift Aid. You may also qualify for additional UK tax relief.

When your Votivation cash account total reaches the normal payment minimum (£25) just click "Request Cash Payment" button below for payment.

We will notify you of your payment by email (enabling you to claim back tax on your annual return).

Step 1 - Select the % of your Votivation account balance you wish to allocate to your preferred charity

Step 2 - Select your Supported Charity

Step 3 - Obtain Gift Aid UK Tax Relief and add up to 28.2% extra through Gift Aid

I declare that I want my charity gift to be treated as a Gift Aid donation. (Please check this to enable your preferred charity to benefit from Gift Aid)

My reward summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Cash</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since joining</td>
<td>Redeemed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£30.09</td>
<td>£0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My votes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profiles</th>
<th>Opinions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cast</td>
<td>Received</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received</td>
<td>Opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 14
Welcome to Votivation
Where your thoughts and opinions really count

"Votivation gives me chance to express my opinions on the issues of the day, and also allows me to understand the opinions of others more fully." E. Ritchie, East Lothian
Click here to find out more about Votivation

Win a dream holiday Meet me now? Will they? Won't they?

Opinion of the day

Dilbert - £00.00

Browse opinions

Latest opinions

Dilbert - £00.00

Dilbert - £00.00

Dilbert - £00.00

Dilbert - £00.00
Edit profile: Spooky 121

Name: Bob Challenger
Postcode: SE1 4ES
Email address: bob@eskimohotel.com
Mobile no.: 07777 777 777
Mobile type: Sony Ericsson T610
Date of birth: 14/07/1978
Date joined: 23/11/2005

I love

I hate

What I'd do if I ruled the world

Supported charity: Anthony Nolan Trust
Referred by: Spooky 120

Figure 16
My profile: Spooky 121

Mobile type: Sony Ericsson T910
Date joined: 04/01/06
Supported charity: Anthony Nolan Trust
Referred by: Spooky 120

I love: cats dogs trees antelopes
I hate: armadillos clouds cafeterias

What I'd Do If I Ruled The World

Votes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cast</th>
<th>Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opinions</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profiles</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rewards summary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cash</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since joining</td>
<td>£306.09</td>
<td>2475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current month</td>
<td>£15.12</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My opinions:

Opinion 1
Opinion 2
Opinion 3
Opinion 4
Opinion 5

Opinions I've voted on:

User 1: Opinion 1
User 2: Opinion 2
User 3: Opinion 3
User 4: Opinion 4
User 5: Opinion 5

My OK people:

User 1: WD1RTW1
User 2: WD1RTW2
User 3: WD1RTW3
User 4: WD1RTW4
User 5: WD1RTW5

My voice messages:

Message 1
Message 2
Message 3
Message 4
Message 5
Promote profile

REMEMBER...

The people most likely to vote for you are your friends, family & others that know you... and those who feel strongly about the issues you do. So, Promote your Profile and generate more votes and points (and perhaps some cash too).

Very simply, we'll send a pleasant email to your friends, family & others inviting them to Vote for YOU, and include within the e-mail a direct link to your Profile.

Also, anyone joining the service from clicking your link becomes one of your permanent, "referred" users... and YOU get a share of their Volitation revenues for you or your favourite charity.....forever.

Email addresses
Enter up to 10 email addresses to promote your profile to...

Personalise your message
Up to xxx characters etc...

Terms of Service
I have read and understood the Terms of Service
My opinion: Spooky 121

In my opinion
What you think and why

Category > sub-category
World region > country
Find out more

Society > Politics  4 84
Middle East > Iran  4 86
1st article
2nd article  4 88
3rd article

Terms of Service

I have read and understood the Terms of Service

Edit opinion  Confirm opinion

Figure 20
Opinion created

CONGRATULATIONS!

Your Opinion has been created

Now Promote Your Opinion!

Promote your Opinion with Votivation's online campaigning tools. This will help you accumulate Votes and points, WIN CASH Prizes... and gain cool "bragging rights".

To promote your Opinion please click the button below.

[Promote opinion]
Promote opinions

Select an opinion to promote
Choose which of your opinions you want to promote below.

Opinion (547) Title:
Opinion (547) Title:
Opinion (547) Title:
Opinion (547) Title:

Email addresses
Enter up to 10 email addresses to promote your opinion to:

Personalise your message
Up to xxx characters etc...?

Terms and conditions
I have read and understood the terms of service.

Reset form
Promote opinion

Flower 22
My opinion: **Spooky 121**

In my opinion
What I think and why

Category > sub-category
Society > Politics

World region > country
Middle East > Iran

Find out more
1st article
2nd article
3rd article

Your vote:
- Agree
- Disagree
- Don't know
- Don't care

**Figure 23**
My opinion: **Spooky**

Category > sub-category
World region > country
Find out more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>56%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't care</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NETWORK-BASED VOTING SYSTEMS AND METHODS AND RECORDING MEDIA STORING PROGRAMS FOR USE IN SUCH SYSTEMS

CLAIM TO PRIORITY

[0001] The present application claims the benefit of priority from U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/650477 filed on 7 Feb. 2005, the entire contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to voting systems, and more particularly to voting systems distributed over a network such as the Internet, and/or other communication networks. In addition, the present invention relates to methods, especially computer-implemented methods, and recording media storing programs, for use in such systems.

[0003] It will therefore be appreciated that, although the examples and embodiments disclosed herein relate to online or Internet-based systems, the present invention is applicable to any type of network.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0004] Conventional online voting systems, such as the V3.0 release of the Vote-for-Me service (originally located at www.Vote-for-Me.com), enable users of the system to submit personal manifestos (profiles) and opinions for consideration by other users of the system. Accordingly, users of the system may review the submitted manifestos and opinions and optionally vote for a number of those manifestos and opinions, or submit further opinions in response thereto. That is, such conventional online voting systems support the creation and management of a population universe comprising users of the system retained and operated via an interactive database (provided in a server and accessible over the Internet) with the objective of generating, recording, reviewing, promoting or ranking (based on popularity as expressed by the population) the combined or individual opinions, intellectual property and/or votes of the population. Such systems may introduce similar-thinking users or groups of users to each other. Such conventional systems charge for services provided to the users by the system, so as to realize profit therefrom.

[0005] The V3.0 release of the Vote-for-Me service comprises the following features. The online nature of the service enables a controlled expansion and extension of the service internationally, thereby enabling international syndicates of users to be formed. Schools, colleges, universities, not-for-profit organisations and commercial organisations may be rewarded for use of the service. Existing users and/or sponsors of the service may reward and further motivate additional users. The system allows networked communities of users to evolve, and, as such, marketing (e.g. viral marketing) can be targeted at such communities to maximise impact. For example, marketing can be targeted at those most likely to vote or participate. Partners and users of the system may add a co-branded voting “booth” to their websites, and be rewarded for doing so. User-generated content is stored in a freely-searchable interactive database, however opinions and intellectual property generated by the users may be sold to interested organisations for profit. The users of the system may be categorised in a number of different ways (for example, by geography, occupation, age, or sex) which enables targeted sponsorship, advertising and market-research opportunities.

[0006] One aim of such online voting systems, apart from the generation of marketable opinions and other intellectual property, is the maximising of profit or other value thereof. Such profit and value can be maximised by increasing the number of users of the system, and by increasing the use rate of the system made by existing and new users. However, in conventional online voting systems, there are no satisfactory methods for motivating new users to join the system, and/or to motivate existing or new users to use the system more.

[0007] Another aim of such online voting systems is to create an environment that is easy to use both from the point of view of the system itself, and from the point of view of users of the system. Conventional systems can be cumbersome to use and to manage.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] The present invention relates to systems, methods and computer programs for use in a network-based voting system with the aim of increasing the number of users of the system, increasing the use rate of the system by each user, and ultimately maximising profit or other value derived therefrom. The network may, for example, comprise the Internet, such that the system is an online voting system. The present invention also relates to code carried by a signal or held on a carrier medium which when executed on a computing device provides a display element and/or a web page for a user of the system.

[0009] According to an embodiment of a first aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer-implemented method of stimulating (e.g. encouraging and/or promoting) use of a network-based voting system, the method comprising transmitting user-specific ranking information to a user of the system.

[0010] One advantageous result of such a method is the benefit derived therefrom by the user. Such information may be useful to the user enabling him (or, once and for all, her) to keep up-to-date with activity occurring within the system. Such information may relate directly to the user concerned (e.g. to how many votes has), or relate to other activity as specified by that user. That user may, for example, be interested in how many votes another user has (for example if they are competing to win a prize).

[0011] Another advantageous result of such a method is the generation of interest in the system, and thereby an increase in use thereof, and ultimately an increase in profit derived therefrom. The receipt of such ranking information by a user of the system may advantageously serve as a reminder of the system, and thereby motivate further use thereof. As mentioned above, such information may relate to how many votes and/or points the user has been credited with. The information may relate to an amount of money held for said user. Such money may be held in an account registered within the system.

[0012] The information may be update information, updating the user as to, for example, the current number of votes and/or points attributed to that user. A user of the system may be notified by such ranking information as to how many
votes his manifesto or opinions have received. If the user has received a large number of votes, he may be encouraged to "brag" (or boast) about his high level of votes to his friends or colleagues. Such bragging (or boasting) may encourage that user to increase his use of the system to try to obtain more votes, for example to try to win one of a number of prizes awarded to users with a high number of votes. Such prizes could include, for example, holidays, experiences, property, or cash. Such bragging may also encourage his friends and colleagues to try to obtain more votes for themselves in order to compete with him. Alternatively, if the user has received a low number of votes, he may be encouraged to try to convince his friends and colleagues to vote for him so as to increase his number of votes. The number of votes possessed by a user may be linked to a number of points or an amount of revenue awarded to the user. In summary, the delivery of such ranking information may serve to increase the use made of the system by the users.

Preferably, such ranking information is delivered to the user without instigation from the user. Preferably, such delivery is effected via an electronic communication network to terminal equipment of the user. This method of delivery may be faster and more reliable than, for example, delivery by post. The ranking information may advantageously be delivered to the telephone (mobile or fixed) of a user over a telephone network (e.g. a land line, a cellular, or a satellite network) in the form of an SMS message (text message). The delivery of such SMS messages may be advantageous as compared to, for example, the delivery of such information by e-mail. This is because a user is likely to check his phone, especially if it is a mobile phone, for new messages more regularly than he checks his e-mail account for new e-mails. It will be appreciated that such messages could also be video, picture, or voice messages.

Preferably, the user is charged for delivery of said ranking information so as to generate income. Such charges may only be raised for some deliveries of such information, or may alternatively be raised for all such deliveries. It may, for example, be advantageous to make a number of deliveries, either initially or pre-determined period, free of charge as a means of marketing the system, and to encourage the user to purchase further such messages.

In the case of certain types of terminal equipment used by users of the system, billing systems may already be in place for charging the user for use of such equipment. In that case, charges for delivery of said ranking information are preferably raised via that billing system. For example, in the case of a telephone, charges for receiving the information by SMS message may appear on the user's telephone bill. Such billing systems allow ease of raising charges to the user, ease of collecting revenue therefrom, and allow the user to take advantage of voting-system services without having to enter credit-card details or the like.

According to an embodiment of a second aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer-readable medium storing a computer program which causes a computer in a network-based voting system to transmit user-specific ranking information to a user of the system.

A computer-readable medium embodying the aforementioned second aspect of the present invention may be part of a server of the network-based voting system. The computer program may, in that case, be operable to cause the server to transmit user-specific ranking information to the user. Preferably, the computer program is also operable to generate the user-specific ranking information for transmission.

A computer-readable medium embodying the aforementioned second aspect of the present invention may be part of a communication device of the network-based voting system located on a communication path between the system server and a user terminal.

According to an embodiment of a third aspect of the present invention, there is provided a network-based-voting-system server operable to cause a communication device to transmit user-specific ranking information to a user of the system.

According to an embodiment of a fourth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a network-based-voting-system server operable to generate user-specific ranking information and to transmit that information to a user of the system.

According to an embodiment of a fifth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a network-based-voting-system server comprising: an information generator operable to generate user-specific ranking information; and a transmitter operable to transmit that information to a user of the system.

According to an embodiment of the aforementioned fifth aspect of the present invention, there is also provided a network-based-voting-system server comprising: information generating means operable to generate user-specific ranking information; and transmitting means operable to transmit that information to a user of the system.

According to an embodiment of a sixth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a signal generated by a network-based voting system, said signal comprising user-specific ranking information.

According to an embodiment of a seventh aspect of the present invention, there is provided a user terminal of a network-based voting system, the user terminal comprising a memory having user-specific ranking information stored therein. The user terminal may be any electronic communication device, for example a personal computer, a mobile telephone, a PDA, or a television set-top box.

According to an embodiment of an eighth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer-implemented method of identifying (verifying and authenticating) a registered user of a network-based voting system, the method comprising: prior to carrying out a transaction with a person over a communication link, obtaining terminal-equipment identification data from terminal equipment of that person; and identifying the person as said registered user of the system in dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

Typically, users of conventional network-based voting systems, for example of conventional online voting systems, must remember one or more passwords or numbers and supply them to those systems in order to be identified, verified and/or authenticated. This is disadvantageous for users of such conventional systems as it places a significant burden on such users to memorise many different numbers,
particularly if the user uses a plurality of such systems. A further disadvantage of such conventional systems for their users is that the process of identification is rendered cumbersome by the need to supply such passwords or numbers. Users generally must enter those numbers using a keyboard or keypad, or recite them to an operator over a telephone line, in order to be identified. Accordingly, a substantial delay is caused for each transaction in such conventional systems which may be seen by users as a disincentive to use those conventional systems. These features of conventional voting systems are also disadvantageous for the systems’ administrators in terms of the system design, and its operation. It is inconvenient and inefficient to need to identify a user through a series of password input operations. These operations are naturally time consuming and lead to an inefficient operation of the system.

[0027] One advantageous result of a method embodying the aforementioned eighth aspect of the present invention is that it removes the need for a user to enter passwords or numbers when carrying out a system transaction. It has been envisaged that there are a number of possible system transactions that a user may engage in, for which it is not necessary to identify the user by means of rigorous identification methods (as in the above-mentioned conventional systems). In those cases, it may be acceptable for a person to be identified as a registered user in dependence on the terminal equipment used by that person.

[0028] Typically, when user terminal equipment communicates with a server (or other system administration equipment) in order to allow the user to carry out a system transaction, terminal-equipment identification data is sent to the server to set-up a communication link. Accordingly, as such data is typically available to the server, it is advantageous to use that data alone to identify the person as a registered user, i.e. without requiring any information to be entered by the user.

[0029] Preferably, the identification of the person as being the registered user is carried out before the transaction is carried out. This may allow data (for example a number of points, votes, or an amount of cash, credited to that user) to be sent to the user before the transaction is carried out. The user may base the transaction on this data. Optionally, however, the identification data may be obtained before the transaction is carried out, and the identification may be made therein, either immediately or at some other later time. In that case, invalid transactions (for example if the identification is unsuccessful) may be cancelled at that later time. This may be suitable for transactions in which the user does not need any information on which to base the transaction.

[0030] Preferably, a record of valid terminal-equipment identification data for the registered user is maintained in the system records, such that a person may be identified as the registered user by comparing the obtained terminal-equipment identification data with the valid terminal-equipment identification data.

[0031] Preferably, the terminal equipment is a telephone or PDA, in which case the terminal-equipment identification data is preferably a telephone number (or other similar number) of the telephone or PDA. Such data may be entered by the user (and stored in system records) when registering to use the voting system. In the case of other types of terminal equipment, for example personal computers or television set-top boxes, the terminal-equipment identification data may be an identifier identifying that computer on a communication network, for example an IP (Internet Protocol) number.

[0032] According to an embodiment of a ninth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer-readable medium having a network-based-voting-system computer program for identifying a registered user of a network-based voting system stored therein, said computer program comprising: a first program portion operable, prior to carrying out a transaction with a person over a communication link, to obtain terminal-equipment identification data from terminal equipment of that person; and a second program portion operable to identify the person as said registered user of the system in dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

[0033] A computer-readable medium embodying the aforementioned ninth aspect of the present invention may be part of a server of the network-based voting system. The computer program may, in that case, be operable to cause the server to obtain terminal-equipment identification data from terminal equipment of that person, and to identify the person as said registered user of the system in dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

[0034] According to an embodiment of a tenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a network-based-voting-system server comprising: a receiver operable, prior to carrying out a transaction with a person over a communication link, to obtain terminal-equipment identification data from terminal equipment of that person; and an identifier operable to identify the person as said registered user of the system in dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

[0035] According to an embodiment of the aforementioned tenth aspect of the present invention, there is also provided a network-based-voting-system server comprising: receiving means operable, prior to carrying out a transaction with a person over a communication link, to obtain terminal-equipment identification data from terminal equipment of that person; and identification means operable to identify the person as said registered user of the system in dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

[0036] According to an embodiment of an eleventh aspect of the present invention, there is provided a network-based voting system comprising a server and a terminal equipment, wherein: the terminal equipment comprises a transmitter operable to transmit terminal-equipment identification data identifying that equipment to the server over a communication link; and the server comprises: a receiver operable, prior to carrying out a transaction with a person having said terminal equipment, to obtain the transmitted terminal-equipment identification data; and an identifier operable to identify the person as said registered user of the system in dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

[0037] According to an embodiment of the aforementioned eleventh aspect of the present invention, there is also provided a network-based voting system comprising a server and a terminal equipment, wherein: the terminal equipment comprises transmitting means operable to transmit terminal-equipment identification data identifying that equipment to
the server over a communication link; and the server comprises: receiving means operable, prior to carrying out a transaction with a person having said terminal equipment, to obtain the transmitted terminal-equipment identification data; and identification means operable to identify the person as said registered user of the system in dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

According to an embodiment of a twelfth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of stimulating use of a network-based voting system, the method comprising: maintaining a prize fund from which monetary prizes may be periodically awarded in a prize draw; financing at least a part of the prize fund with lottery syndicate ownership, such that lottery winnings of the syndicate are paid into the prize fund; and entering a user of the system into the prize draw based on a use of the system related to that user.

Preferably, at least the maintaining of the prize fund and the entering of the user in the prize draw are implemented by a computer, for example by a server of the network-based voting system. Optionally, a method embodying the aforementioned twelfth aspect of the present invention is a computer-implemented method.

It is advantageous to finance at least part, and possibly all, of a prize fund with syndicate ownership. Such syndicate ownership may be partial or full syndicate ownership. Supranational, national, and state lotteries commonly have multi-million dollar (or other currency depending on the nation concerned) jackpots, and this may serve as a real attraction to users. Accordingly, it is likely that more use of the system will be made by such users to enable them to be entered into the prize draw. This extra use of the system may be beneficial to the system administrators and owners as it may generate more income therefrom. Furthermore, the method enables the administrators to market the network-based voting system based on the chance of winning such a substantial jackpot, or a share thereof, without having to put up the prize money themselves.

Optionally, a user may be entered into the prize draw if a use of the voting system made by that user has exceeded a predetermined level. Optionally, a user may be entered into the prize draw if a number of points credited to that user has exceeded a predetermined level. Optionally, a user may be entered into the prize draw if a number of votes credited to that user by other users has exceeded a predetermined level. Optionally, a user may be entered into the prize draw if an amount of revenue generated for the system by that user has exceeded a predetermined level. Optionally, a user may be entered into the prize draw if an amount of cash paid into a system account of that user, either by the system or by the user or by any other party, has exceeded a predetermined level. Accordingly, a user may be entered into the prize draw based on either activity of that user, or based on the activity of other users (for example voting for that user’s manifesto, opinions, polls, or surveys).

A method according to an embodiment of the aforementioned twelfth aspect of the present invention is preferably applicable to a national (federal) or state vote, for example to an election, such as a general election. Such an election may be, for example, for a State Governor, or for the position of U.S. President. It is envisaged that the application of such a method thereto may have the advantageous effect of motivating a large proportion of the voting population to vote, due to the incentive of a possible jackpot prize. Low voter turn-out is a recognised problem throughout the world.

According to an embodiment of a twelfth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer-readable medium having a network-based voting-system computer program for stimulating use of a network-based voting system stored therein, the computer program comprising: a first program portion operable to maintain a prize fund from which monetary prizes may be periodically awarded in a prize draw, at least a part of the prize fund being financed with lottery syndicate ownership such that lottery winnings of the syndicate are paid into the prize fund; and a second program portion operable to enter a user of the system into the prize draw based on a use of the system related to that user.

According to an embodiment of a thirteenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a server of a network-based voting system adapted for stimulating use of said system, the server comprising: first means operable to maintain a prize fund from which monetary prizes may be periodically awarded in a prize draw, at least a part of the prize fund being financed with lottery syndicate ownership such that lottery winnings of the syndicate are paid into the prize fund; and a second means operable to enter a user of the system into the prize draw based on a use of the system related to that user.

According to an embodiment of the aforementioned thirteenth aspect of the present invention, there is also provided a server of a network-based voting system adapted for stimulating use of said system, the server comprising: first means operable to maintain a prize fund from which monetary prizes may be periodically awarded in a prize draw, at least a part of the prize fund being financed with lottery syndicate ownership such that lottery winnings of the syndicate are paid into the prize fund; and second means operable to enter a user of the system into the prize draw based on a use of the system related to that user.

According to an embodiment of a fourteenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer-implemented method of sharing revenues generated by users of a network-based voting system with those users, the method comprising: apportioning a share of said revenues to a first one of said users in dependence upon use made of the voting system relating to the first user; and if the first user was introduced to the voting system by a second one of said users, apportioning a part of said share to the second user.

Advantageously, such a method may encourage existing users to introduce new users to the system so as to increase an amount of user-generated revenues apportioned to those existing users.

Preferably, a user of the voting system may use a communication device to access the voting system. Furthermore, that user must preferably pay via a billing system for use of said communication device. In that case, a method according to the aforementioned thirteenth aspect of the present invention preferably further comprises using said billing system to charge that user for services provided to him/her by the voting system so as to generate said revenues.

The use of such an existing billing system is advantageous due to the relative ease with charges may be
raised, and the ease with which revenues so generated may be collected. Additionally, it is considered advantageous for system administrators to not have to send out invoices to users, and for users to not have to, for example, enter credit card details or the like every time a service to be paid for is used.

[0050] Preferably, a method according to the aforementioned fourteenth aspect of the present invention further comprises maintaining, for each of a plurality of said users, a record of one or more parties to which at least part of any user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned should be distributed; enabling each said user having such a record to update his/her record from time to time; and when a user’s allocated revenues are to be distributed, distributing those revenues to each party specified in his/her record.

[0051] Users may be attracted to an online voting system employing such a method as it enables them to individually select a party (for example, a charity or a family member) to which a (specifiable) proportion of their allocated revenues should be distributed.

[0052] According to an embodiment of a fifteenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer-readable medium having a network-based-voting-system computer program for sharing revenues generated by users of a network-based voting system with those users stored therein, the computer program comprising: a first program portion operable to apportion a share of said revenues to a first one of said users in dependence upon use made of the voting system relating to the first user; and a second program portion operable, if the first user was introduced to the voting system by a second one of said users, to apportion a part of said share to the second user.

[0053] According to an embodiment of a sixteenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a server of a network-based voting system adapted for sharing revenues generated by users of the system with those users, the server comprising: a first apportioner operable to apportion a share of said revenues to a first one of said users in dependence upon use made of the voting system relating to the first user; and a second apportioner operable, if the first user was introduced to the voting system by a second one of said users, to apportion a part of said share to the second user.

[0054] According to an embodiment of the aforementioned sixteenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a server of a network-based voting system adapted for sharing revenues generated by users of the system with those users, the server comprising: first apportioning means operable to apportion a share of said revenues to a first one of said users in dependence upon use made of the voting system relating to the first user; and second apportioning means operable, if the first user was introduced to the voting system by a second one of said users, to apportion a part of said share to the second user.

[0055] According to an embodiment of a seventeenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided, in a network-based voting system, a computer-implemented method of distributing money to at least one party, the method comprising: maintaining, for each of a plurality of users of the system, a record of one or more parties to which at least part of any user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned should be distributed; enabling each said user having such a record to update his/her record from time to time; and when a user’s allocated revenues are to be distributed, distributing those revenues to each party specified in his/her record.

[0056] Preferably, the or each said party is a charity. Preferably, such a record is maintained for each user of the system. Preferably, for each said party in each said record, there is maintained data indicating what proportion of the allocated revenues should be distributed to the party concerned.

[0057] According to an embodiment of an eighteenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer-readable medium having a network-based-voting-system computer program for distributing money to at least one party stored therein, the program comprising: a first program portion operable to maintain, for each of a plurality of users of the system, a record of one or more parties to which at least part of any user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned should be distributed; a second program portion operable to enable each said user having such a record to update his/her record from time to time; and a third program portion operable, when a user’s allocated revenues are to be distributed, to distribute those revenues to each party specified in his/her record.

[0058] According to an embodiment of a nineteenth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a server of a network-based-voting-system adapted for distributing money to at least one party, the server comprising: a first unit operable to maintain, for each of a plurality of users of the system, a record of one or more parties to which at least part of any user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned should be distributed; second means operable to enable each said user having such a record to update his/her record from time to time; and a third unit operable, when a user’s allocated revenues are to be distributed, to distribute those revenues to each party specified in his/her record.

[0059] According to an embodiment of the aforementioned nineteenth aspect of the present invention, there is also provided a server of a network-based-voting-system adapted for distributing money to at least one party, the server comprising: first means operable to maintain, for each of a plurality of users of the system, a record of one or more parties to which at least part of any user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned should be distributed; second means operable to enable each said user having such a record to update his/her record from time to time; and third means operable, when a user’s allocated revenues are to be distributed, to distribute those revenues to each party specified in his/her record.

[0060] It is envisaged that the following advantageous features may be the basis of further aspects of the present invention, either alone or in combination with other features disclosed herein.

[0061] A user of the network-based voting system may be able to acquire a partial ownership of the company (or other similar entity) providing the voting system. Such ownership may take the form of ownership of company shares. The share of ownership available to a user may be dependent on a use made of the system related to that user. Such a use may be a use of the system by that user, or by other users (for example voting for that user). It is envisaged that this
acquisition of ownership by users of the voting system may act as an incentive for those users to remain as users of that system (as opposed to moving to become users of another voting system). It is also envisaged that such users are more likely to introduce new users to the voting system to try to increase a value of their ownership, for example to increase a value of company shares. Such user are also more likely to try to increase a use of the system made by existing and new users for similar reasons.

Users of the network-based voting system may be treated as equals. This is significantly different to normal society in which the opinions of certain individuals carry more weight than those of other such individuals. It is envisaged that, by treating users as equals, users may be encouraged to submit more opinions (i.e. use the system more), as their opinions will be judged based on merit alone.

Due to the nature of network-based voting systems, the present invention is intended to include any combination of any of the aforementioned aspects of the present invention, and/or any of the aforementioned preferable features thereof. The present invention is also intended to include combinations of the features disclosed below in the detailed description of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Reference will now be made, by way of example, to the accompanying drawings, in which:

FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of an online voting system in which embodiments of the present invention may be employed.

FIG. 2 is a schematic overview of the operation of the FIG. 1 voting system.

FIG. 3 is a schematic diagram of the range of services provided by the FIG. 1 voting system.

FIG. 4 is a flow diagram of a method embodying the present invention.

FIG. 5 is an image of information transmitted by the FIG. 4 method.

FIG. 6 is an image of other information transmitted by the FIG. 4 method.

FIG. 7 is a flow diagram of a method embodying the present invention.

FIG. 8 is a schematic diagram representing a method embodying the present invention.

FIG. 9 is a flow diagram of a method embodying the present invention.

FIG. 10 is a schematic diagram representing a method embodying the present invention.

FIGS. 11 to 26 are examples of web pages, or images therefrom, in which embodiments of the present invention have been employed.

VOTING SYSTEM

FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of an online voting system in which embodiments of the present invention may be employed. An example of such a voting system 1 is the V4.0 release of the Vote-for-Me service (replacing the aforementioned V3.0 release, and to be located at www.Vote-for-Me.com, or www.votivation.com). The voting system 1 comprises a voting system server 2 connected to the Internet 4, an optional external system storage 6, a plurality of user computers 8, a wired phone service provider 10, a plurality of user phones 12 served by the wired phone service provider 10, a cellular network provider 14, a plurality of user cellular devices 16 served by the cellular network provider 14, a cable or satellite service provider 18, and a plurality of user units 20 served by the cable or satellite service provider 18.

The voting system 1 is distributed over a network, in this case over the Internet. Accordingly, a large number of users may access the voting system server 2 via the Internet 4 using a plurality of different types of user equipment 8, 12, 16, and 20. It will be appreciated, however, that it is not necessary for such a plurality of users to access the voting system server 2 at any one time, although this is of course possible. For example, at a particular time there may only be one or two users accessing the voting system server 2 via one or two corresponding user computers 8.

The voting system's predominant role is to provide a voting service (hereinafter the "Service") to users of the system. The Service comprises a number of constituent services provided to the user to be discussed below with reference to FIG. 3. The term "user" is intended to include customers or clients of the service i.e. registered paying users and non-registered users, as well as system administrators. The Service is predominantly provided from the voting system server 2, and any optional external system storages 6. The voting system server 2 may be a single device, or may comprise a plurality of devices distributed over the Internet 4. Similarly, the optional external system storage 6 may be a single device, or may comprise a plurality of devices distributed over the Internet 4. There may also be a plurality of wired phone service providers 10, a plurality of cellular network providers 14, and a plurality of cable or satellite service providers, for example located in different countries. It will be appreciated that, in view of the flexibility of the Internet 4, the components of the online voting system 1 may be spread across the world, or alternatively all located in a single country or state.

The Service may be provided to users in a number of different formats. Primarily, the Service is provided in the form of web-pages, supplied to users over the Internet 4 in the form of HTML code (or other similar language) and viewable using web-browser software on a user computer 8. The Service may similarly be provided to users' cellular devices 16 having a WAP (Wireless Access Protocol) or other similar capability. The Service may similarly be accessible from a television set of a user in either a read-only format, or in an interactive format (for example if the user receives a cable or satellite service). It will therefore be appreciated that embodiments of the present invention comprise code and signals transmittable to a user of the Service.

System Operation

FIG. 2 is a schematic overview of the operation of the online voting system 1. Generally, users commencing use of the Service fall into one of two categories. Such users may be "referred users" 30, or "non-referred users" 32. Referred users 30 are generally new users, and have been
referred to the Service by another party. For example, such a new user may be referred to the online voting system 1 from a link on another website 34, or from a link in a received e-mail 36, or in some other way 38. Examples of other referrals 38 are responding to a text, voice or other message, referral by word-of-mouth, or by responding to an advert placed, for example, in a publication or broadcast on a television or radio service. A non-referred user 32 may be, for example, a new user 40 joining the voting system 1 having navigated to its homepage (main web page) by chance, or an existing user 42 already aware of the Service.

Generally, users will approach the Service (i.e. join the online voting system 1) via its homepage 50. Any user may proceed without logging in 52, in which case they may use a limited range of the constituent services 54 provided by the voting system, until such time as they are finished 56. Registered users may log in 58 to use the Service. If a user successfully logs in 60, then he may use the full range of the constituent services 62 provided by the online voting system 1. At such time as a logged-in registered user may wish to conclude his use of the Service, he may log out 64 (or be automatically logged out) at the end 66 of such use. The logging-in process 58 typically involves a registered user entering a user name and password. However, such a registered user may log in using other methods, to be described later with reference to FIG. 7.

Preferably, a new user will decide to register 70 for full use of the voting service. Such registration will conclude a recruitment of the user into the population database of the voting service. Such registration requires the new user to submit a mobile/cell phone number, amongst a number of further personal details. Additionally, the user is required to set out a statement via a range of standardised questions, the objective of which is to briefly sum up for other users the general nature of that user’s political, social, economic, religious, leisure or other beliefs. Together, these inputs are included in, and presented via, the user’s “manifesto”. A user may subsequently amend or add to his manifesto or other personal details at any time, to be described later.

A further part of the registration process is the recordal of a referer (if the new user is a referred user 50) to be credited with referring that user to the Service. This information may be entered by the new user or may be entered automatically. For example, if the new user was referred to the voting service via a link in an e-mail, or via a link in another website, those links may have been embedded within them code identifying the originator (e.g. the owner of the other website or the sender of the e-mail) that allows the Service to identify the referer and enter his details automatically. This link between the new user and a referer will be the basis for a financial relationship therebetweent, to be discussed later.

The benefit of such registration 70 for the new user is to enable the user to take advantage of the full range of services 62, and to start to accumulate revenues and points. The registration process 70 benefits the service itself by ensuring the uniqueness and quality of the new user’s generated opinions, voting, referring and other activities. Additionally, as registered users are required to pay for the use of certain system services, such registration will lead to increased revenue and profits for the owners of the Service.

Within the registration process 70, the user may confirm whether or not his manifesto, views and/or opinions may be communicated to appropriate parties, such as governments, elected officials, elected candidates, corporate entities, television and other media organisations, and non-profit organisations (including charities, trade associations and educational establishments, and their agencies). The communication of such user-generated material to such appropriate parties may generate a source of income for the owners of the voting service.

The registration process 70 is confirmed 72 by the sending by the Service and receipt by the user of an e-mail including a link, which the user must then click or otherwise visit. In this way, the user will be directed to an area that securely enables the unique association between the user’s identification within the service database and the user’s e-mail address. Additionally, or alternatively, the registration process 70 may be similarly confirmed 72 by the sending by the voting service and the return by the user of a text or other message via a hand-held or portable communication device of the user. Such devices may include, for example, mobile/ cell telephones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and other such devices. If the registration is confirmed, the user may proceed to complete his manifesto 74 as above-mentioned. If, however, the registration is not confirmed, the user may not proceed.

On completion of the manifesto 74, a decision is made as to whether the user was referred to the Service 76, as mentioned above. If the new user was referred to the Service, a link between the new user and the referer is stored 78 in the database of the voting system. This completes the registration process, and the new user is registered 80. The new user may then log in 58, and ultimately use the full range of services 62 of the voting service, or may conclude use thereof 66.

FIG. 3 is a schematic overview of the range of constituent services 100 provided by the online voting system 1, as mentioned above, any user may use a limited range of the services without logging in. However, a registered user may log in and use the full range of services 100. The provided services comprise enabling a user to: view content 102; vote for content 104; set up content 106; amend his manifesto 108; amend his profile 110; add files to his manifesto 112; add files to other content 114; promote market or distribute 116; search a database 118; receive a standard set of alerts 120; manage services or his account 122; create a vbook 124; and communicate 126. Services 102 and 104 may, for example, be the only services available to non-logged-in users.

Users may view and browse 102 opinions, polls and surveys submitted to the service by other users. This information may be presented to the user on a web page, or be downloadable therefrom. Such users may also vote for the opinions, polls and surveys of other users, such functionality being provided on web pages of the service or on any similar interactive medium.

Registered users may set up 106 and submit their own content to be viewed by other users of the service. Such users may generate and submit their own opinions, polls, and surveys for other users to view and vote for.

A logged-on user may amend his manifesto 108, for example if the general nature of his political, social,
economic, religious, leisure or other beliefs has changed. He may also amend his profile 110, for example if any of his personal details have changed.

[0092] A logged-on user may add files to his manifesto 112, for example audio files, video files, graphic files, or text files. Such a user may, for example, want to add digital photos, spreadsheets, presentations, or other files. That user may also want to add such files to other created content 114, for example to opinions, polls, surveys, or other content.

[0093] A user may promote, market, and/or distribute his opinions, polls, and surveys using a number of marketing facilities provided by the service. Such facilities may include copying the web address of his own (or of other users’) opinions, surveys and polls into an e-mail. Such promotion may increase the chance of other users voting for his own generated content.

[0094] Certain types of information supplied or submitted by users is stored in one or more databases which are searchable. Such information, in addition to the opinions, polls, and surveys, may include details from the manifestos submitted by system users. Accordingly, users may search 118 the database(s) to find wanted information.

[0095] A registered user may receive a number of standard alerts 120. Such alerts may be provided, for example, in the form of an e-mail, or in the form of a text message sent to a mobile communication device of the user. The alerts may, for example, contain information updating the user as to how many points he has received, and/or how many votes he has received in respect of his manifesto, or his opinions, polls, or surveys. The alerts may inform the user of activity relating to other users, to activity relating to the award of prizes by the service from time to time, or any other activity of interest to the user. Examples of such alerts are discussed below with reference to FIGS. 5 and 6.

[0096] The records held in the system database for each user detail those services that the user concerned wishes to receive automatically, and maintain a record of the points and votes held by the user. A user may manage his services or his account 122 by accessing those records from a personal user service management area. He may add to, amend, or cancel some or all service elements that he is registered for. For example, he may decide to request (and pay for) further alerts in addition to the standard set of alerts automatically provided.

[0097] The user may create 124 and add a pop-up or other browser web link, for example called a voting booth (V-Booth™, V-Booth™, or V-Booth™) to his website, blog (web log), or other web-based page. The user may also purchase “keywords” to add to his link or voting booth so that it displays content, opinions, surveys and polls generated by the Service only, or largely relevant to those keywords. The user may also pay for his voting booth to be coloured, rendered, graphically enhanced, stylised, or otherwise re-designed so that it reflects a “branding” presentation of his choice. This service (and other system services) may be obtainable for free.

[0098] The user may communicate with other users 126. For example, he may engage in live web chat (or telephony, computer-computer communication, or VoIP) with other users, or contact them via e-mail, mobile phone messaging, or simply over the phone.

[0099] For each activity (e.g. creating setting up content 106, or voting 104) conducted by a user, he may be awarded points that are accumulated in his records or account as mentioned above. The accumulated points are convertible into entries into regular or one-off prize draws. The available prizes may be cash prizes.

[0100] For each activity conducted by a user that generates revenue (e.g. purchasing further alerts, or other content or services) for or through the Service, a share of those revenues is awarded to the user. These shares are then accumulated in the user’s records or account. The accumulated cash may be withdrawn by the user through payment by the Service to the user via bank transfer, cheque or other method as stipulated by the service or the user. The accumulated revenues may be converted into actual shares in the company owning the service on terms stipulated by the board of the company. Accordingly, users may acquire ownership of a proportion of the Service, based on use of the Service. The Service itself may generate further revenues through the sale of advertising spaces in web pages provided by the Service, and the inclusion of sponsored links to other websites therein.

[0101] If a particular user is registered as having been referred to the Service by a referrer, a proportion of any points or revenues awarded to that user will be awarded to the referrer.

[0102] FIG. 4 is a flow chart of a method 130 embodying the present invention. The method 130 comprises a single step 132. In step 132, user-specific ranking information is transmitted to a user of the voting system 1. The method 130 may be part of service 120 of FIG. 3, and cause a standard alert to be transmitted to the user. The method 130 may also be part of service 122 of FIG. 3, and cause an alert requested by one user to be transmitted to that user, or to another user.

[0103] Method 130 is preferably carried out within the voting system server 2. Method 130 may additionally, or alternatively, be carried out within one or more devices of the Internet 4, the wired phone service provider 10, the cellular network provider 14, or the cable or satellite service provider 18.

[0104] FIG. 5 is an image 140 of part of a user cellular device 16. The image 140 shows a display part 142 displaying an example of user-specific ranking information 144 (an alert) as received by the cellular device 16 from the voting system server 2 via the cellular network provider 14.

[0105] The user-specific ranking information 144 informs the user that the “Top opinion rank: 64/563”, and that the “Votes Rec’d: 158”; and that the information is from the Service provided by “motivation.com”.

[0106] FIG. 6 is an image 150 of the same part of the user cellular device 16 shown in FIG. 5. Accordingly, the image 150 shows a display part 142. The display part 142 displays an example of user-specific ranking information 154 (an alert) as received by the cellular device 16 from the voting system server 2 via the cellular network provider 14.

[0107] The user-specific ranking information 154 is clearly addressed to a specific user called “Joe”, the message is addressed “Dear Joe”. The user “Joe” is thereby informed as follows: “Your Ranking: 44/1921”, and “Votes Rec’d: 342”. By means of the user-specific ranking information
154, the user “Joe” is reminded of the Service, and is informed that he is ranked 44th out of 2192, and that he has received 342 votes.

[0108] The user “Joe” may be pleased with his ranking and be encouraged to forward (or show) the SMS message 154 to other users, so as to brag. Alternatively, he may not be pleased with his ranking and be encouraged to promote his manifesto, opinions, polls, and/or surveys to gain more votes or points.

[0109] FIG. 7 is a flow chart of a method 160 embodying the present invention. The method 160 comprises two steps 162 and 164. In step 162, terminal-equipment identification data is obtained from terminal equipment of a person seeking to carry out a system transaction. The transaction may be any of the range of services 100 discussed above with respect to FIG. 3. The method then proceeds to step 164. In step 164, the person is identified as a registered user of the system in dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

[0110] Method 160 is preferably carried out in the voting system server 2. The terminal equipment may be any of a user computer 8, a user telephone 12, a user cellular device 16, a user unit 20, or any other equipment capable of communicating with the voting system server 2. The terminal-equipment identification data may be any data uniquely identifying the equipment concerned.

[0111] Method 160 may, for example, enable a user to vote (service 104) for manifests, polls and surveys etc. from his mobile telephone without needing to log-in 58 to the system via the service homepage 50. This ease of voting may encourage an increased level of use of the system.

[0112] FIG. 8 is a schematic diagram of a method 170 embodying the present invention. Method 170 comprises maintaining a prize fund 172 from which monetary prizes may be periodically awarded in a prize draw 173. At least a part of the prize fund 172 is financed with lottery syndicate ownership 174. Accordingly, any winnings of a lottery syndicate are paid into the prize fund 172. A user of the online voting system 1 may be entered 176 into the periodic prize draw 173 based on a use of the system related to that user.

[0113] The user-related use of the voting system 1 necessary to enable that user to be entered into the prize draw 173, may be use of any of the range of services 100 of FIG. 3. That use may be use by the user concerned, for example that user submitting opinions or polls or surveys, or use by another user, for example voting for his opinions, polls or surveys.

[0114] FIG. 9 is a flow-chart of a method 180 embodying the present invention. The method 180 comprises three steps 182, 184, and 186. In step 182, a share of revenues generated by users of the online voting system 1 is apportioned to a first user in dependence upon use made of the voting system relating to that first user. In step 184, a decision is made as to whether that first user was introduced to the online voting system 1 by a second user. If the first user was so introduced, the method 180 proceeds to step 186, in which a portion of that share is apportioned to that second user. The method 180 then terminates. If the first user was not introduced to the online voting system 1 by a second user, the method 180 also terminates.

[0115] The use made of the online voting system 1 relating to the first user may be use of the system by the first user, or alternatively use of the system by other users, for example voting for that first user. The use may be use of any of the range of services 100 discussed above with reference to FIG. 3.

[0116] It will be appreciated that the method of FIG. 9 may be scaled upwards either vertically or horizontally. For example, one user may have referred a plurality of users and may thus obtain a portion of each of those user’s shares. Alternatively, for example, the second user may have been referred by a third user. In that case, the third user may receive a portion of the second user’s share (and thereby also receive a portion of the first user’s share), or the third user may obtain a portion of the first user’s share and/or of the second user’s share directly.

[0117] FIG. 10 is a schematic diagram of a method 190 embodying the present invention. As part of the method 190, a record 192 is maintained, for each of a plurality of users 194 of the online voting system 1, of one or more parties 196 to which at least part of any user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned should be distributed. From time to time, each said user 194 having such a record 192 may update 198 his/her record. For example, a user 194 may update the number of parties 196 stored in his record 192, or change the names of those parties 196 stored in his record 192. Additionally, the user 194 may update 198 the amount or proportion of his revenues that should be allocated to each specified party 196.

[0118] When a user’s allocated revenues are to be distributed, those revenues are distributed to each party specified in his record. This distribution may be done regularly, or at the request of the user. Alternatively, this distribution may be made when a user’s revenues have reached a predetermined level.

[0119] The methods of FIGS. 4, 7, 8, 9 and 10 are implemented in the voting system server 2 of the online voting system 1. Accordingly, those methods are implemented by means of one or more computer programs stored within, or accessible by, the voting system server 2.

[0120] FIGS. 11 to 26 are examples of web pages provided from the voting system server 2, or images therefrom, in which embodiments of the present invention have been employed. These examples are useful for gaining a better understanding of embodiments of the present invention.

[0121] FIG. 11 is an example homepage of the online voting system 1. Such a homepage may, for example, be stored within the voting system server 2, and viewed by a user of the system on a user’s personal computer 8.

[0122] The homepage is shown in a not-logged-in state. The homepage comprises a log-in area 200, which indicates that no user is logged in with the phrase “you are not logged in”. Accordingly, a user may log in by entering his user name 202, and his password 204, in the boxes provided.

[0123] The homepage of FIG. 11 displays an opinion of the day 210, and a number of further opinions 212. A number of buttons 214 are provided to enable a user to vote for the opinions displayed. In the present example, any user may vote for any opinion 212, 214 without logging in.
The homepage of FIG. 11 also displays a “top voters” list, a “opinion formers” list 222, and a “top earners” list 224. Accordingly, a not-logged-in user can view current ranking information by visiting the homepage of the online voting system 1. The homepage of FIG. 11 also includes a button 230 to enable new users to register to use the Service.

FIG. 12 is an example of a web page 250 displayed to a user in order to register that user to use the online voting system 1. This web page 250 includes a number of fields which the user may fill in. The user may enter a display name 252, his real name 254, his e-mail address 256, his cell or mobile telephone number 258, his date of birth 260, a password 262, his country of origin 264, and optionally how he heard about the online voting system 266. The information 266 may be used to identify a referrer responsible for referring the new user to the Service.

The web page 250 also includes an information box 270 informing the new user that the registration will be confirmed with an activation e-mail with a personalised activation link which must be clicked, and with a free, welcoming, SMS text message containing a keyword, to which the new user must reply. This process is akin to the process 72 described with respect to FIG. 2.

At the bottom of the web page 250, are two buttons 272 and 274. The new user may either reset the form 272, thereby clearing any detail entered by the user, or may register 274 for use of the service using the entered details.

FIG. 13 is an example of a web page 300 which may be presented to a newly-registered user. Web page 300 enables such a newly-registered user to set up his profile. In the present example, the new user is called “spooky 121.”

The web page 300 includes two fields 302 in which the user may enter items that he loves, and items that he hates. The web page 300 also includes an area in which the user may upload, after completing the form, an image of himself 304. The web page 300 also includes a field 306 in which the user may briefly summarise what he would do if he “ruled the world.” In this way, the user can let other users know what his opinions are, what issues he considers important, and how he would like things to be improved.

The web page 300 also includes an area 308 in which he may specify a percentage 310 of his account balance 310 to allocate to a preferred charity. In field 312, the user may select a particular chosen charity. The present example is directed to a British user, and accordingly, web page 300 includes an area 314 in which the user may opt to obtain Gift Aid UK Tax Relief.

FIG. 14 is an example of a web page 340 which may be presented to a registered user to summarise his account details. The present example is for the hypothetical registered user “spooky 121.”

Web page 340 includes an area 342 indicating the user’s personal details, and includes a photo 344 of the user. In the present case, web page 340 also indicates that the hypothetical user “spooky 121” was referred to the Service by another registered user “spooky 120.”

Web page 340 indicates that the user has chosen to allocate none of his account balance 348 to a preferred charity, and accordingly that no charity has been selected 350.

Towards the bottom of web page 340, there is a summary 352 of the rewards held by the user. The amount of points and cash held by the user is indicated. By clicking the button 354, the user may request a payment of cash from his account. Web page 340 also includes a summary 356 of the number of votes credited to the user, in the present case itemised as to those received for his profiles, and those received for his opinions.

FIG. 15 is a further example of a homepage for the online voting system 1, similar to the homepage of FIG. 11. In FIG. 15, however, another hypothetical user “spook 121” is shown as being logged in. Accordingly, the former log-in area 200 states that “you are logged in as: spook 121.” The logged-in user spook 121 may view information 400 concerning the votes, cash, and points credited to him, and may also view 402 his profile, his account, and his prizes.

FIG. 16 is an example of a web page 420, for enabling a user to edit his profile. Accordingly, the user may update his personal details 422, update the information indicating his loves and hates 424, update information concerning what he would do if he “ruled the world” 426, and upload a new photo or picture 428 to be displayed in his profile.

FIG. 17 is an example of a web page 430 demonstrating how a user’s profile may be presented to other users of the system. Web page 430 displays the profile of the hypothetical user “spooky 121.”

Web page 430 includes two buttons 432 to enable other users to vote for, or against, the user’s profile. Web page 430 also includes an area summarising the votes 434 and the rewards 436 credited to the user concerned. A number of links are provided at the bottom of web page 430, to enable other users to visit: the opinions submitted by the user concerned 438; the opinions that the user concerned has voted for 440; the other users or other people considered “OK” by the user concerned 442; and voice messages 444 submitted by the user concerned.

FIG. 18 is an example of a web page 450 which may be presented to a user to enable him to promote his profile. Web page 450 includes an area 452 in which the user may enter up to ten e-mail addresses to which a promotional message is to be sent. Additionally, a field 454 is provided in which the user may enter a message to be sent to the entered e-mail addresses. Web page 450 also reminds the user 456 that he will be credited with a share of any revenues generated by new users referred to the Service by that user.

FIG. 19 is an example of a web page 460 which may be presented to a user of the online voting system 1 to enable that user to create an opinion. Accordingly, the web page 460 includes a number of fields to enable the user to enter information specifying “what he thinks and why” 462, a title for his opinion 464, a category 466 and a sub-category 468 for his opinion, and an associated region 470 and country 472. Further fields 474 also enable the user to enter a number of links to articles relating to his opinion.

FIG. 20 is an example of a web page 480 which may be presented to a user of the online voting system 1 to summarise his entered opinion. Accordingly, web page 480 identifies his entered opinion and its title 482, the category and sub-category relating to the opinion 484, the related
world region and country 486; and the related linked articles 488. A button 490 is provided for the user to confirm his opinion.

[0142] FIG. 21 is an example of a web page 495 which may be presented to a user of the online voting system 1 to confirm that his opinion has been created. Accordingly, web page 495 includes a congratulatory message 496, confirming that the opinion has been created, and encouraging the user to promote his opinion. A button 498 at the bottom of web page 495 may be clicked by the user to enable him to promote his opinion.

[0143] FIG. 22 is an example of a web page 500 which may be presented to a user of the online voting system 1 to enable him to promote one or more of his submitted opinions. Accordingly, web page 500 includes a field 502 in which the user may select one or more of his submitted opinions for promotion. Web page 500 also includes a set of fields 504, in which the user may specify a number of e-mail addresses to which promotional material may be sent. Field 506 enables the user to enter a personalised message which will be sent to the entered e-mail addresses. The user may then click the button 508 to commence the promotion of his opinion(s).

[0144] FIG. 23 is an example of a web page 510 which may be presented to a user of the online voting system 1 to display an opinion submitted by another user. Accordingly, web page 510 indicates which user 512 the opinion belongs to. In the present case, the opinion is the opinion of the hypothetical user “spooky 121”. Web page 510 also displays the title 514 of the opinion, the opinion itself 516, a photo of the user who submitted the opinion 518, and information and/or links 520 detailing the category, related articles, and related articles.

[0145] Towards the bottom of the web page 510, there are a series of buttons 522 to enable a user to vote for the opinion. The user may agree 524, or disagree 526 with the opinion. Additionally, the user may submit a “don’t know” 528, or a “don’t care” 530 vote.

[0146] FIG. 24 is an example of a web page 540 which may be displayed to a user of the online voting system 1 to indicate the results of voting for an opinion. Accordingly, web page 540 includes the same information (512, 514, 516, 518, and 520) as provided in web page 510. Additionally, however, web page 540 includes a summary 542 of the votes cast for the opinion concerned. In the present case, web page 540 indicates that 56% of voters have agreed with the opinion, 19% have disagreed with the opinion, 11% have cast a “don’t know” vote, and 14% have cast a “don’t care” vote.

[0147] FIG. 25 is an example of a web page 550 that may be presented to a user of the online voting system 1 to indicate that they have successfully created a personal VBooth. A link for the created VBooth 552 is displayed in the centre of web page 550.

[0148] FIG. 26 is an example of a web page 560 which may be presented to a user of the online voting system 1 after having clicked the VBooth link 552 of FIG. 25. Accordingly, web page 560 indicates that the user has entered the VBooth of a hypothetical user “slippery”. Web page 560 includes facilities to enable the user to vote for opinions, polls, surveys, manifestos, profiles, or the like.

[0149] Embodiments of the present invention may be implemented in hardware, or as software modules running on one or more processors, or on a combination thereof. That is, those skilled in the art will appreciate that a microprocessor or digital signal processor (DSP) may be used in practice to implement some or all of the functionality of a server (or other communication equipment) embodying the present invention. The invention may also be embodied as one or more device or apparatus programs (e.g. computer programs and computer program products) for carrying out part or all of any of the methods described herein. Such programs embodying the present invention may be stored on computer-readable media, or could, for example, be in the form of one or more signals. Such signals may be data signals downloadable from an Internet website, or provided on a carrier signal, or in any other form.

[0150] The present invention is applicable to different types of distributed communication network and does not necessarily need to be implemented over the Internet 4. For example, the present invention may be implemented within a private network such as an intranet.

1. A computer-implemented method of stimulating use of a network-based voting system, the method comprising transmitting user-specific ranking information to a user of the system.
2. The computer-implemented method according to claim 1, comprising transmitting said information without instigation of the user.
3. The computer-implemented method according to claim 1, comprising delivering said information via an electronic communication network to terminal equipment of the user.
4. The computer-implemented method according to claim 1, further comprising charging the user for receipt of said information.
5. The computer-implemented method according to claim 1, further comprising:
   generating an SMS message comprising said information, for transmission over a telephone network; and
   delivering said SMS message to a telephone of said user over said network.
6. The computer-implemented method according to claim 5, further comprising employing a billing system, by which the user is charged for use of said telephone, to charge the user for delivery of said SMS message.
7. The computer-implemented method according to claim 1, wherein said information comprises information relating to a number of votes and/or points credited to said user.
8. The computer-implemented method according to claim 1, wherein said information comprises information relating to an amount of money held for said user.
9. A computer-readable recording medium storing a computer program which causes a computer in a network-based voting system to generate user-specific ranking information for transmission to a user of the system.
10. In a network-based voting system in which at least some users of the system are registered, a computer-implemented method of identifying a registered user comprising:
   prior to carrying out a transaction with a person over a communication link, obtaining terminal-equipment identification data from terminal equipment of that person; and
identifying the person as a registered user of the system in
dependence upon the terminal-equipment identification
data alone.

11. The computer-implemented method according to
claim 10, further comprising:
maintaining a record of valid terminal-equipment identifi-
cation data for each registered user; and
identifying the person as a registered user by comparing
the obtained terminal-equipment identification data
with the valid terminal-equipment identification data.

12. The computer-implemented method according to
claim 10, wherein the terminal equipment is a telephone or
PDA, and wherein the terminal-equipment identification
data is a telephone number of the telephone or PDA.

13. A computer-readable recording medium storing a
computer program which causes a computer in a network-
based voting system, in which at least some users of the
system are registered, to identify a registered user, said
computer program comprising:
a first program portion operable, prior to carrying out a
transaction with a person over a communication link, to
obtain terminal-equipment identification data from ter-
mal equipment of that person; and
a second program portion operable to identify the person
as a registered user of the system in dependence upon
the terminal-equipment identification data alone.

voting system, the method comprising:
maintaining a prize fund from which monetary prizes are
periodically awarded in a prize draw;
financing at least a part of the prize fund by means of a
lottery syndicate, such that lottery winnings of the
syndicate are paid into the prize fund; and
entering a user of the system into the prize draw based on
a use of the system related to that user.

15. The method according to claim 14, comprising imple-
menting at least the maintaining of the prize fund and the
entering of the user in the prize draw with a computer.

16. The method according to claim 14, comprising enter-
ing a user into the prize draw if a use of the voting system
made by that user has exceeded a predetermined level.

17. The method according to claim 14, comprising enter-
ing a user into the prize draw if a number of points credited
to that user has exceeded a predetermined level.

18. The method according to claim 14, comprising enter-
ing a user into the prize draw if an amount of revenue gen-
erated for the system by that user has exceeded a prede-
determined level.

19. The method according to claim 14, comprising enter-
ing a user into the prize draw if a number of votes for that
user made by other users has exceeded a predetermined
level.

20. A computer-readable medium storing a computer
program which causes a computer in a network-based voting
system to stimulate use of the system, the computer program
comprising:
a first program portion operable to maintain a prize fund
from which monetary prizes may be periodically
awarded in a prize draw, at least a part of the prize fund
being financed by means of a lottery syndicate such that
lottery winnings of the syndicate are paid into the prize
fund; and
a second program portion operable to enter a user of the
system into the prize draw based on a use of the system
related to that user.

21. In a network-based voting system, a computer-imple-
mented method of sharing revenues generated by users of
the system amongst those users, the method comprising:
apportioning a share of said revenues to a first one of said
users in dependence upon use made of the voting
system relating to the first user; and
if the first user was introduced to the voting system by a
second one of said users, apportioning a part of said
share to the second user.

22. The computer-implemented method according to
claim 21, wherein at least one user of the voting system uses
a communication device to access the system, the method
further comprising:
using a billing system of the communication device, by
which the user is charged for use of said communica-
tion device, to charge that user for services provided to
that user by the voting system so as to generate said
revenues.

23. The computer-implemented method according to
claim 21, further comprising:
maintaining, for each of a plurality of said users, a record
of one or more parties to which at least part of any
user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned
are to be distributed;

enabling each said user having such a record to update
his/her record from time to time; and
when a user’s allocated revenues are to be distributed,
distributing those revenues to each party specified in
his/her record.

24. The computer-implemented method according to
claim 22, further comprising:
maintaining, for each of a plurality of said users, a record
of one or more parties to which at least part of any
user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned
are to be distributed;

enabling each said user having such a record to update
his/her record from time to time; and
when a user’s allocated revenues are to be distributed,
distributing those revenues to each party specified in
his/her record.

25. A computer-readable medium storing a computer
program which causes a computer in a network-based voting
system to share revenues generated by users of the system
amongst those users, the computer program comprising:
a first program portion operable to apportion a share of
said revenues to a first one of said users in dependence
upon use made of the voting system relating to the first
user; and
a second program portion operable, if the first user was
introduced to the voting system by a second one of said
users, to apportion a part of said share to the second
user.
26. In a network-based voting system, a computer-implemented method of distributing money to at least one party, the method comprising:

maintaining, for each of a plurality of users of the system, a record of one or more parties to which at least part of any user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned are to be distributed;

enabling each said user having such a record to update his/her record from time to time; and

when a user's allocated revenues are to be distributed, distributing those revenues to each party specified in his/her record.

27. The computer-implemented method according to claim 26, wherein the or each said party is a charity.

28. The computer-implemented method according to claim 26, comprising maintaining such a record for each user of the system.

29. The computer-implemented method according to claim 26, comprising maintaining, for each said party in each said record, data indicating what proportion of the allocated revenues should be distributed to the party concerned.

30. A computer-readable medium storing a computer program which causes a computer in a network-based voting system to distribute money to at least one party, the program comprising:

a first program portion operable to maintain, for each of a plurality of users of the system, a record of one or more parties to which at least part of any user-generated revenues allocated to the user concerned are to be distributed;

a second program portion operable to enable each said user having such a record to update his/her record from time to time; and

a third program portion operable, when a user's allocated revenues are to be distributed, to distribute those revenues to each party specified in his/her record.

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