

## Book Reviews

### **Lots of Questions, a Few Good Answers: A Look at Current Research on the Internet and Politics**

*Click on Democracy: The Internet's Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action*, by Steve Davis, Larry Elin, and Grant Reeher. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002. 304 pp. \$32 paper.

*Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*, by Dan Schiller. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 320 pp. \$22 paper.

*Digital Democracy: Issues of Theory and Practice*, edited by Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan van Dijk. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000. 240 pp.. \$110 hardcover.

*Governing the Internet: The Emergence of an International Regime*, by Marcus Franda. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001. 255 pp. \$49.95 hardcover.

*Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power*, by Bruce Bimber. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 284 pp. \$22.99 paper.

*Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule*, by Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas. New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003. 218 pp. \$18.95 paper.

*Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace "Revolution,"* by Michael Margolis and David Resnick. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000. 256 pp. \$37.95 paper.

*Review essay by* KENNETH ROGERSON

It is the information age, the Internet boom, and the communications revolution. There are information and communications technologies (ICTs), telecommunications, satellite uplinks, and global positioning systems. Comprehending how all of these work and their impact on society and politics is fodder for social scientists for many years to come. Though it can be used for other types of information flow, information technology (of which the Internet is a part) is political communication. The Internet is indispensable in

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politics. If an individual or group is *not* online, it is a problem. Politicians, citizens, venture capitalists, and grass roots movements are all using new technologies, sometimes for show and sometimes exploiting their potential to the fullest. Researchers and scholars are jumping on the bandwagon, trying to make sense of the complex relationships, and the changes that these relationships seem (on the surface) to be making in society, while explaining the relevant political nuances as well.

A clearer understanding of the role of information flows in society and politics will only come after years of research, permitting both better opportunities for comparison and a chance to rely on hindsight. Remember the anecdote of the wealthy recluse whose butler brought in the morning paper, took it to the basement, and retrieved the paper from the same day 20 years earlier. The only way to tell what was truly important, he said, was to see what was relevant 20 years after the fact. But for research to work in the future, we must begin now, especially making an attempt to define concepts, identify trends and processes, and weed out spurious assumptions.

In my mind, there are three basic puzzles that scholars are grappling with in an attempt to understand and explain new technologies and politics:

- First, questions of research method. These include both methodological and theoretical questions. How can we better understand the impact of new technologies, and what is the best way to study them?
- Second, questions of character. Is the Internet a public or private medium? It is certainly some of both, but how much should citizens fight to keep it public? Should the government get involved to create a “public sphere” on the Internet?
- Third, questions of impact. How does the Internet have an impact on society? What are the negative and positive consequences of integrating new technologies into daily political, economic, and social life?

Though there is some overlap between these, they are questions all Internet researchers ask at some time in some way. A number of books have been published over the past few years addressing these questions, some directed toward policymakers, others toward students, and still others toward the community of interested scholars.

But first a clarification: The word Internet is bandied about like a badminton birdie. It is often used as the example to represent new technologies as a whole. The Internet is the most visible of the new technologies, but things such as global positioning systems and other satellite-related technology, cellular/mobile telephony, and other wireless technology and innovations such as high definition television (HDTV) also fit in this category. Even the “Internet” itself is not a concrete term. It is used interchangeably with the World Wide Web, the Net, cyberspace, and the information superhighway, among others. Though, technically speaking, each refers to differing amounts of connectivity, precise definitions are difficult to pin down in current research. But defining is a vital part in the development of a field of study as well as its integration into existing research areas. The books reviewed here cover a broad range of what the new technologies and the Internet mean.

### **Research Methods**

Systematically wrestling with interesting theoretical questions and integrating solid, concrete empiricism are the goals of every scholar in political communication. We all know we should do it, but it is not always easy given length and resource limitations. This is

especially difficult with new concepts like “new technologies” and “new media.” Scholars work through the middle road of applying new concepts to existing theory while venturing out to see if new theory is plausible. It certainly takes time to do this. If, for example, scholars still look to Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Walter Lippman for new insights into media effects or public opinion, then those studying new technologies are just at the beginning of a long—and, potentially, extremely interesting—research agenda.

To begin, there is the question of the questions. What exactly are we researching? What is the unit of analysis? The number of times people look at a Web page (called page views or hits)? How fast a page loads on a server? The content of the page? Who is putting up the content? How many hits are returned when certain searched terms are plugged into search engines like Lexis/Nexis or Google? Who talks to whom? How messages are interpreted?

Then there are the theoretical inquiries. The most relevant questions for now to political communication are the discussions about new technologies and democratic processes. Does the use of the Internet improve or detract from democracy? Is direct democracy possible? Are electronic political networks more or less secure than non-electronic ones? Do these networks encourage new participants in the democratic process? Do they simply provide those already involved with new channels of information and communication? Does computer mediated communication (CMC) change the way political ideas or ideologies are presented or understood? Are new technologies different from mass media such as newspaper or television? Does the medium alter the message as opposed to face-to-face communication, and if so, how?

In their edited volume, *Digital Democracy*, Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan van Dijk grapple with some of these questions of theory and practice by asking more questions, lists of them in fact (pp. 4–5)—good questions from which many researchers could glean ideas for projects. They and their contributing authors go on to address, if not really answer, some of the questions raised. The premise of much of the volume is to apply the concept of “public sphere” (a la Jurgen Habermas) to the Internet (and not other technologies).

But in creating the link between theory and empiricism, they fall a bit short. The second half of the volume contains five chapters evaluating relatively specific cases in light of the concepts, models, and theories that come before. The problem is not in the analysis, which for the most part is strong and interesting, but in the relevance of the cases themselves. Though published a mere 4 years ago, four of the five case studies are hopelessly outdated: the White House Web site during the Clinton administration (the chapter refers the reader to [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov), which now has entirely different content), a Democratic primary election in California, participation in a Web site for senior citizens in the Netherlands, and the digital divide. The quickly changing technology, coupled with the problem of archiving Web content (beginning to be addressed by [archive.org](http://archive.org)), makes many observations in these studies irrelevant to further study. One author acknowledges the limited nature of the impact. “To date, a total of only 10,000 or so individuals are actively involved in the 4 community projects in computer networking. So the impact of electronic communication on local political participation has been very small” (p. 28). And yet, the theoretical chapters ask some very good questions that need addressing. To be fair, this is something all researchers of Internet-related issues must address at one time or another and something that we still have not found a satisfactory way to answer.

More from an American politics focus, Michael Margolis and David Resnick penned

*Politics as Usual, The Cyberspace "Revolution"* in an attempt to push cyberspace related scholarship conceptually, if not theoretically. In a very readable account of how the Web hasn't really changed politics all that much, the authors pose and answer the following:

Will the Internet provide the means for electoral politics to assume a more democratic character as CMC reduces the organizational costs of political participation? The evidence suggests that the nature and popularity of the Web are more likely to foster an electoral politics that replicates the real world, albeit in a slick electronic form. . . . It seems doubtful . . . that their impact will be to democratize or otherwise bring about fundamental change in American politics. (pp. 57, 72)

The authors call this "the normalization hypothesis," the idea that activities on the Web will eventually become more and more like their offline inspirations. They come to this conclusion through an overview and analysis of politically related Internet activity: political parties and interest groups, governments, media, e-commerce, and more specific case studies about gambling and cybercrime. Much of the background material in these chapters could be very useful for students being introduced to technology and politics. But this falls into a trap similar to the edited volume above: The data are outdated. The quantifiable impact of technology and the Internet on society changes so quickly that this impact may seem less relevant than it really is.

On the other hand, the normalization hypothesis is refreshing because it is *not* earth shattering, but provides a concrete concept from which further research might come.

We believe that a more mundane but ultimately powerful effect of the Internet holds out a greater chance of fostering democracy. The Internet will help to spread democracy, but not because more people will conduct more of their politics online. Rather, as we enter an age in which information will be at the center of new forms of economic wealth, the Net will facilitate the spread of that wealth. (p. 210)

This is a fascinating logical step for the authors to take. It rings true but doesn't seem fully supported by the earlier chapters. They certainly support their claim of the normalization of cyberspace and provide excellent reading on how and why the Internet has an effect on political processes, but throwing in this issue of the commercialization of cyberspace without much explanation leaves the reader desiring a bit more.

### **Public Versus Private: Does the Internet Belong to the People or the Corporations?**

By coming to this conclusion, Margolis and Resnick raise one of the stickier questions among Internet scholars: Is the Internet a public good? Its early history is clearly one of government and academic use, but it expanded to the private sector fairly quickly as businesses and entrepreneurs envisioned and implemented a variety of profitable uses. Lawrence Lessig highlights this tension in his books *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (1999) and *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (2001). His delineation between "east coast code" (public policy) and "west coast code" (software) did shed some light on the strains that exist between the desire to profit from the

Internet and the desire to retain as much open access as possible. For many scholars, it seems government intervention is the only acceptable answer.

Dan Schiller's book *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* gives us some of the "more" that we wanted from Margolis and Resnick, including a greater insight into this tense relationship between government and business. But Schiller has a clear agenda. The commercialization of cyberspace and the commoditization of information (see Comor, 1998) have had negative effects on society. As a result of the explosion of digital networks, "policymakers the world over simultaneously abandoned public-service policies for market-driven tenets and accede to the integration of networks on a transnational scale. National welfarist controls over this critical infrastructure dropped away, while disparities in access widened" (p. 2). Schiller believes that "digital capitalism has strengthened, rather than banished, the age-old scourges of the market system: inequality and domination. The road to redress begins from this recognition" (p. 209).

In the end, Schiller is not really prescriptive, only persuasively descriptive. But that description is deep and thoughtful. At the same time, however, he clearly addresses another important issue of Internet-related research: How much does the Internet share characteristics with existing media? Is the Internet like newspapers because it is text based, like television because of its visual characteristics, or like satellite because of its trans-border nature? These questions matter both for definitional research purposes and for policy-making. He writes, "All new media must borrow off the shelf of prevailing practice. So, too, the Internet evinces obvious carryovers from established print and electronic media" (p. 129). His argument doesn't dwell as much on the differences or similarities (though a very interesting and valuable discussion) as it immediately moves to his theme, "the ongoing metamorphosis of cyberspace into an advertiser-dominated consumer medium" (p. 129). According to Schiller, the desire to retain the "commons" status of the Internet is doomed, since governments have left all innovations in control of the market and, "for the first time since its emergence in the early twentieth century, the corporate-led market system no longer confronts a significant socialist adversary" (p. 205).

### The Impact of the Internet

Schiller's rather pessimistic view of the cooptation of the global digital network, including the Internet, brings us to the final area of Internet-related research: What is the impact of the Internet on politics, economics, and society? The current phraseology includes terms like optimism versus pessimism and utopian vs. distopian. These are certainly not dichotomous and could easily represent a spectrum of ideas. But, without a doubt, this has been a theme in Internet-related research.

One of the better recent research efforts examining the impact of the Internet on society is Bruce Bimber's *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power*. Bimber is able to overcome some of the methodological constraints by balancing specific cases with their impact on larger issues. He provides a theoretical, rather than purely conceptual or empirical, account based on the following thesis:

Elites exercise a powerful influence on the organization of democracy. . . . Exogenous changes in the accessibility or structure of information [i.e. the Internet] cause changes in the structure of elite organizations that dominate political activity, and these in turn affect the broad character of democracy. (p. 18)

The strength of this account comes more from the journey than the conclusions. The smooth integration of theories and concepts from the literature on the democratization of the United States with the activities of groups who are utilizing Internet technologies as a tool for their organizational goals helps Bimber make the case that technology is extremely relevant to democratic process. He makes the assumption that many have made before: An informed citizenry contributes in a positive way to democracy. But—and here is where his argument takes a different and valuable turn—he posits “that the informed citizen in the age of the Internet is not a rational actor . . . Instead, informed citizenship involves the information-rich growing even richer as the cost of information falls, while those poor in information remain so.” And, since citizen consumption of information happens in ways that are contingent on context and external stimuli, this leads him to the hypothesis that changes in the nature of information should not really change the level of citizen engagement in the political process. Thus, he continues, “information should work somewhat differently at the level of organizations and the level of individuals” (p. 25). In other words, information that leads to group action may not lead to individual action, and vice versa.

Bimber proposes that the best explanation for how information affects society is to look less at how the information is presented and more at who receives it and how they interpret and use it. He suggests that, for the information age, these processes are best explained through postbureaucratic politics, or political processes in which traditional bureaucratic organization is not needed. Given improved technology *and* citizen proficiency with it, groups don’t need as many staff or resources, aren’t as strict about who is involved and when they are involved, and rely on informal and ad hoc relations as much as—or more than—formal ones (p. 105). These are certainly some interesting claims given the explanatory power of Olson’s (1971) classic, *The Logic of Collective Action*. The empirical portion of the book evaluates the claims of postbureaucratic politics in light of consumer protection and privacy, environmental advocacy, education policy, gun control, and the 2000 U.S. election. He concludes that though the cases do not perfectly support the model, “a relationship exists in contemporary politics between the evolution of information abundance and changes in organizational structure” (p. 188). Although this is not a strong conclusion, Bimber is left where all Internet researchers are left: It is difficult to assess the impact of something when we are in the middle of it. We can look at where we *might* be headed, but we will need to wait a decade or two before replicating some of Bimber’s excellent methodology and research questions to answer the question of impact. The real value of this book is that it answers the question about the impact of information on political processes *before* the information age.

One question with which I was left at the end of the book was that of the feedback loop. How does it work? How personal does it get? Who actually reads the e-mail and who responds? With information abundance, the issue of meaningful feedback will only be more and more difficult to address.

Another recent book that addresses the question of impact is *Click on Democracy: The Internet’s Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action* by Steve Davis, Larry Elin, and Grant Reeher. It is a very anecdotal account of people who were involved in the 2000 U.S. presidential election campaign and how they and their work were related to the new role that the Internet assumed during this election. Despite a slightly discernible conservative focus, the book manages to remain relatively unbiased in its analysis of the Internet and how it has begun to affect politics.

*Click on Democracy* provides examples of how the Internet helped mobilize political efforts in the past, from John McCain’s presidential fundraising endeavor to raising money for illegal protests. There is evidence of both optimism and pessimism in this

volume. The book also implies that the Internet was not fully utilized during the 2000 presidential election and that its true potential has yet to be realized in the political arena. Throughout the book, the authors state that they believe the Internet is the next giant step in mobilizing political participants across the country, similar to the role of television in the mid-20th century. But there are drawbacks. “Although the Internet population swelled to more than half the country during the 2000 election, true believers in the Internet’s power to create an informed electorate were disappointed to find that the most frequented sites featured the day’s weather and that one of the most popular search topics was ‘Pam Anderson,’ the buxom former star of TV’s *Baywatch*” (p. 29).

The authors bring up some very important issues without explaining them too thoroughly. Referring to the digital divide, they mention that those with higher incomes and education and who are not minorities are typically the ones with Internet access, while those with lower education and minorities are the ones without. In a nod to the public versus private debate, *Click on Democracy* comes down on the public side. The authors believe that, given the chance, citizens will adopt the Internet and use it for political purposes. Another interesting assertion is that the Internet is not competing against television in the sense that the Internet might take the place of television advertising. The Internet simply gives the public additional choices for news and other political information.

A potential conceptual contribution is a simple categorization of the types of Internet-related political activity into communities: communities of belief, action, identity, and discourse. Though conceptual development is needed, the divisions are interesting and potential material for further research. Further, the “lessons learned” (p. 251) are a bit weak, given the wealth of anecdotal information preceding them. Two of the lessons—“invest more” and encouraging the government to “put a computer in every pot”—may even be in contradiction, if the tension over the cost of prescription drugs is any indication. In the end, we are left with one of the big questions of relevance. Though the book is replete with interesting anecdotes of the 2000 election, what value does this collection have for understanding how the Internet affects democratic process today? The authors might have tried to answer this more completely, but for some reason, chose not to.

Moving away from the United States, there are two books that address the question of impact in a more systematic way. *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* by Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas takes a comparative cross-cultural look at the political impact of the Internet in places where control of information is vital to sustaining the existing government. *Open Networks* moves beyond a simple description of the way things are and looks for trends and patterns in usage, governance, and regulation in authoritarian states. The authors challenge what they call the “conventional wisdom” about the positive correlation between more democracy and better technology. They conclude that there are “many ways in which Internet use may pose challenges to authoritarian regimes. . . . Yet the authoritarian state is hardly obsolete in the era of the Internet. [In fact], authoritarian regimes can guide the development of the Internet so that it serves state-defined goals and priorities” (p. 136).

The authors make it very clear that they “do not seek to prove definitively that the Internet will not help to undermine authoritarian regimes, nor do we argue that the medium is merely a tool of repressive governments. Rather, we set forth a framework that allows for methodical thinking about limited evidence” (p. 3). Acknowledging this modest goal also recognizes the limitations of the data with which they are working. They attempt to find information about technology and its uses from governments that are hesitant to share any information, especially that which is not laudatory. This is the one big question mark from this volume, but one that all Internet researchers regularly

struggle with. How credible are the data? Yet, the authors are to be congratulated for trying. They have provided a base point from which further research in this area can be done.

On a broader theoretical level, Marcus Franda's *Governing the Internet: The Emergence of an International Regime* brings us full circle. Integrating theory from the literature on international relations with issues of global relevance, Franda takes on the optimism/pessimism debate through the eyes of regime theory. While tackling the oft-debated topic of Internet governance, Franda asks whether a technology that, in principle, can't be stopped at any geo-political border can be governed. What group might do it? How could it be done? In the spirit of true neoliberalism, he suggests that the governance of the Internet will depend entirely on the "leading" countries (those which are more technologically advanced) and their ability to coexist with each other. In other words, international cooperation, which leads to the development of a regime—"principles, norms, rules and decisionmaking procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area" (p. 3)—is the way to handle problems that arise from the transborder flow of information through the Internet.

Franda states that the current regime is based on two principles (see chap. 2): (a) that the private sector should take the lead in Internet governance and (b) that openness should govern all Internet-related decisions. He studies e-commerce and taxation, intellectual property, privacy, and security to support this contention—certainly not a complete laundry list, but they are subjects of importance and relevance in current international discussions and negotiations. Though this is a welcome work for those interested in the Internet and international relations, there is an underlying theme that needs to be pointed out. "Since almost all of the initial inventions that made international computer networking possible were the products of the United States and Europe, it is not surprising that those two parts of the world have been in the forefront of the Internet's formation and growth" (p. 209). But with this comes the question of how well the United States and Europe will fulfill the role of leaders in regime formation, a position they are certainly in, even if not by choice. The one problem that arises through Franda's reasoning, though, is whether the United States and Europe are trustworthy enough to help other countries further their Internet development, maybe even in a way that is different than how it has been governed in the past. But he does *not* say that no one else can catch up. In fact, a small portion of the world has just begun to catch up. The outlook for many countries and their development of the Internet is, in fact, optimistic.

From this sampling of research, I agree with Bimber when he says we are in the middle of the revolution. Our research reflects that. Given the state of things, it may be helpful to add the word pragmatic into our optimism and pessimism. Pragmatic optimism would recognize and systematically address the shortcomings of both the research and the technology. Pragmatic pessimism would do more than complain that things are bad and add in some implementable, feasible policy prescriptions.

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