



Review Article

Approaching digital democracy

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Gary Hall

Digitize This Book! The Politics of New Media, or Why We Need Open Access Now. Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 301 pp. ISBN: 978-0-08166-4871-9, \$19.95 (pbk)

Matthew Hindman

The Myth of Digital Democracy. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. 181 + xiii pp. ISBN: 978-0-691-13868-8, \$22.95 (pbk)

Damian Tambini, Danilo Leonardi and Chris Marsden (eds), *Codifying Cyberspace: Communications Self-regulation in the Age of Internet Convergence.* London and New York: Routledge, 2008. 323 + x pp. ISBN: 1-84472-144-2, £19.99 (pbk)

This is a particularly interesting time for internet scholars and activists because we are near the end of irrational exuberance about the internet's potential to realize everything from the death of time (Negroponte, 1995) and space (Mitchell, 1995) to the death of death itself (Kurzweil, 1999). Foremost among these visions of what I have called the digital sublime (Mosco, 2004) was the technological realization of democracy. Admittedly, each new iteration of Web 2.0 appears to summon the familiar 'this will change everything' mantra. (As I write this, CNN is flashing a headline from the British newspaper *The Independent* boasting about the new search engine Wolfram Alpha: 'An invention that could change the internet forever.') But the utopian visions have lost their sublime appeal. A decade of technological and economic crashes (who now reads the book *Dow 36000?*) has turned a sonorous mantra into a tinny squeal.

On the other hand, we have not yet reached the point where the social relations of the internet have hardened to the point that genuine social change with and through the internet is unlikely. In a sense, the internet is at a point not unlike that which AM radio was at in 1930, FM in 1950, broadcast television in 1960 and cable television in 1970. Of course, because communication technologies develop in different historical configurations, there is no precise mapping of one trajectory atop another. Nevertheless, there are interesting similarities, including initial euphoria (it will change everything!) followed by a period of genuine political debate over, for example, the need for public radio and television, for public access cable television, and now for digital democracy. Once past

the point of believing that the technology will automatically realize profound social change, people begin to consider the hard work of creating the social institutions to make the best, e.g. the most democratic, use of the technology.

All three books considered here are products of these interesting times. They share profound hopes, particularly for expanding democracy with and through new media, but they are past the point of unbridled euphoria that marked the rhetoric of the 1990s. I was not sure of this when I began reading *The Myth of Digital Democracy* because page 1 pronounces of one of the early internet systems: 'Mosaic changed everything.' It is not unusual for euphoria to hang around but, thankfully, there is little of this breathless prose in the rest of the book. In fact, at the risk of sounding a bit euphoric myself, I think that this is one of the most important recent books about the internet and the prospects for using it to advance political democracy. Specifically, Hindman deftly makes use of empirical research on internet use to address some of the most politically significant questions facing new media analysts, policy-makers and activists. A political scientist, Hindman is most interested in the impact of the internet on politics, including its use in political campaigns. More generally, he asks about the prospects for a democratic media, for information diversity, and for expanding the electronic public sphere. In doing so, the book does us all a service by scouring what remains of irrational exuberance about instant and automatic internet democracy with a careful use of empirical evidence. It leaves interesting conclusions about what is changing and what persists in political and media arenas that increasingly rely on the internet.

Hindman takes seriously what he calls the myth of digital democracy because the view that new media expand citizen access to and control over the political sphere is widespread, including, as his description of leading public figures, including jurists, attests, some of the most powerful figures in American society. Hindman is aligned with the more skeptical scholars who confront the myth with fears about digital divides, ownership concentration, a highly segmented public sphere, and coarsened public discourse. Not as hopeful as Pippa Norris and Yochai Benkler, Hindman identifies with their, especially Benkler's, view of digital democracy as an expansion of the networked public sphere. Seemingly impatient with debates about theory, Hindman is more comfortable with specific questions that empirical detail can illuminate. One of the more remarkable features of the book, and evidence of the author's open and agile mind, is that the first empirical chapter takes on the case of Howard Dean's early success in the 2004 presidential campaign which was based on a strategy that appears to support the myth.

Specifically, Dean successfully challenged two well-founded conclusions of political scientists who study campaigns. Volunteers are best mobilized through friendship networks and campaign contributions tend to come from a small group of wealthy individuals and institutions. Dean succeeded by using the internet to mobilize a mass of volunteers and to generate millions of dollars in campaign contributions from a large number of small donations. People learned about Dean from websites more than from friends, and used those sites to join the campaign and make contributions. Yes, his opposition to the war in Iraq and his sheer energy were also responsible for Dean's early success, but it is hard to believe that a relative unknown from a small state could raise \$52 million in a competitive presidential campaign without the internet. For Hindman, this demonstrates that new media helped to bring about a change in the 'back office' side of politics just as it did in the service

industries. It changed both fund-raising and the mobilization of a campaign army. What it did not change was the longstanding ability of both old and new media to amplify the sensational – in this case, Dean's well-known post-primary battle cry that turned a thoughtful physician into a bombastic raver. Nevertheless, Dean's internet strategy would help to propel Barack Obama's successful run for the White House in 2008.

Aside from this admittedly important operational change in political democracy, the internet, in Hindman's view, constrains more than it enhances democracy. For him, 'the mechanisms of exclusion may be different online, but this book suggests that they are no less effective' (p. 12). The three major exclusionary mechanisms include the internet link structure that takes people to a narrow group of popular, mainly commercial, websites, the concentrated economic power of a few leading companies (Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft), and the dominant position of white, educated professionals in the online world. Hindman claims that it is a myth to believe that the internet levels the playing field and gives voice to the marginalized. One of the primary reasons for this is the link structure that guides internet searches. Using data from 120,000 websites visited by 60,000 users, he demonstrates that the link structure follows a power law distribution which means that users tend to go to sites that have already accumulated the most links. The high correlation between the number of links and site visits confounds the theory of the long tail which sees the internet as providing a large space for many heretofore marginalized people. He disagrees with Benkler's view that universal uptake and local filtering create just the right balance to maintain a networked public sphere. Hindman maintains that Benkler's conclusion applies, if at all, only to those few sites that are parasitic on pre-existing real world social networks such as those for universities and publicly listed companies. Given the winner take all and power law principles, he maintains that 'putting up a web site is like hosting a talk show on public access television at 3:30 in the morning' (p. 56). Actually, when we look more closely at his data, this appears to be an optimistic conclusion.

Using Hitwise data on internet traffic, Hindman demonstrates the concentrated nature of the search process. Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft handle 95 percent of all search requests, a degree of control that, in the early years of radio and television, prompted a system of government regulation. Today, there is not much beyond the talk. The limited global regulation that exists is run out of a private corporation based in California. Google and Yahoo! agree on the top search result 90 percent of the time. The top 10 websites receive 25 percent of all traffic. Traffic to political websites is relatively sparse, about one-tenth of one percent of all web traffic, a drop in the bucket compared to the 10 percent of all traffic that goes to porn sites. Moreover, the demographic for political sites is skewed toward older people. The internet has hardly proven to be the solution to political estrangement among young people. Additionally, traffic to political sites is also highly concentrated, with the top 50 of 773,000 political sites tracked receiving 41 percent of all political site visits, most of it concentrated among the top eight. While Yochai Benkler might describe this as democracy and while it provides a case for what Schudson calls monitorial citizenship (as long as there are enough opinion leaders to keep track of things, we are safe), Hindman does not believe that this describes a robust democracy, a genuine electronic public sphere, and certainly not much in the way of e-citizenship.

To explain the results, Hindman relies on two types of argument, one cognitive and the other structural. The cognitive explanation suggests that people approach the internet

with specific needs and simplify with a vengeance. Eighty-five percent of searches do not go beyond the first page of results and people visit sites they already know. As one might expect, attention to political sites grows with education, but it remains sparse. The structural explanation is based on the power of a handful of companies, led by Google, and on substantial barriers to entry. Capital expenditures soak up two-thirds or \$1.3 billion annually of Google's net income.

Hindman's cognitive explanation makes sense but is not pursued in sufficient depth to completely persuade. He would rather spend time on the structural side and does so by applying major measures of economic concentration, the well known and widely used Gini-coefficient, the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index, and the newer Noam Index to test the ability of the internet to deliver a diverse set of news and information sources. Here he finds that, in spite of the many sites, news and media consumption is more concentrated online than off. While the number of outlets is greater online, the percentage that reaches a non-trivial audience has stayed about the same. Indeed journalism traffic is more concentrated online than off, with the growth in attention to small outlets offset by the decline in attention to mid-level ones.

But what about newer forms of news and political communication? Hindman focuses here on blogs and is no more sanguine about their prospects for advancing democratic communication. The top five political blogs attract 28 percent of political site traffic and the top 10 just about half. Moreover, they are 'the new elite media', (p. 102) since those that reach a non-trivial audience tend to be produced by highly educated white men. Indeed, the blogosphere is far less socially diverse than print journalism which in recent years has made some progress in gender and racial diversity. Hindman's demographic analysis of major political bloggers finds an overwhelming emphasis on highly educated (and mainly Ivy educated) lawyers and academics. Rather than amplify the typical citizen, political blogs reflect an earlier world where women and minorities were invisible in the newsroom. Moreover, blogs do so without the journalistic standards that provided some grounds to trust the daily printed word. Even if blogs were to expand their reach ('only a few dozen political bloggers get as many readers as a typical college newspaper', p. 103), it would take an enormous structural change for them to reach the limited diversity of traditional media. Hindman does not address new social media like Facebook and Twitter, but it is likely they too would fall into his general conclusion that 'the road to e-democracy is littered with the burned-out husks of failed projects' (p. 138).

I have dwelt on Hindman's book because it offers a carefully reasoned and empirically grounded argument that the political internet fails to promote democracy. It has done little to narrow the gap between rich and poor and between policy elites and citizens. The evidence suggests that, on the contrary, as he puts it, 'the online public sphere is already a de facto aristocracy dominated by those skilled in the high deliberative arts' (p. 139). More importantly, it suggests that democratic political change requires a more fundamental institutional transformation. Unfortunately, Hindman provides little help here other than to drop the odd hint about making Google a public utility and improving political education so that people develop the capacity to know what to look for. He leaves it to others to develop the ground his research has cleared.

The alluringly titled *Digitize This Book!* takes a step in a democratic direction by addressing the movement for open access to research. As Gary Hall describes in this

multi-layered account, in the nooks and crannies of neo-liberalism commercialism and a dominant market logic, there has evolved a diverse movement to open the world of research across the sciences and the humanities to widespread public access. It may sound strange to look for democracy in the universities and research institutes that Hindman's aristocracy of intellectuals has nourished. In this respect, Hall's grounding in cultural theory provides an advantage. The work of Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and Laclau and Mouffe sensitize him to the complexities of discourse, the tenuousness of social categories, and the unpredictability of contested terrains. As a result, Hall neither presumes that elite institutions necessarily produce aristocrats nor that empirical evidence on social characteristics is the final answer to the potential for democratic social change. Surprises often come from the belly of the beast and the open access movement is one example.

Hall offers a general political economic critique of the changes that neo-liberalism has brought about in the production and distribution of research. While the online world has extended access to research for some, its overall impact is disappointing because online typically means for a price that only the rich can afford. Admittedly daunting library stacks have been replaced by gates of electronic commercialism that price books, journals and their findings out of the reach of most citizens in need. Hall's response is manifold. At the most practical, he has headed up a project known as 'Culture Machine', which aims to democratize research in cultural studies by, among other things, establishing the archive CSeARCH (for Cultural Studies e-Archive) which is used to upload and download research on literary, critical and cultural theory, new media, visual communication, communication and media studies, philosophy, psychoanalysis, science and technology studies, feminist theory and post-colonial theory. Its goal is to provide a globally available repository of research whose only gate is an online connection. For Hall, such a practical defense against aristocracies of knowledge needs to be grounded in a theoretical commitment that uses both political economy to skewer the established system and cultural theory to reconstitute knowledge and our relationship to it. Finally, based on an intuitive awareness of what Hindman's evidence has revealed, Hall insists that intellectual democracy requires a fundamental transformation of intellectual production which includes those sites, mainly universities and research institutes, traditionally responsible for this work. In other words, one cannot simply graft the online world onto the university and expect a democracy of knowledge to flower. Institutional transformation, including democratization, must go hand in hand with eliminating the commercial, political and cultural gates that restrict access to information.

As often happens when an author extends a dramatic reach across theory, practice and politics, there is some slippage. There are times when the book meanders through theoretical thickets not clearly connected to the central theme of open access. One can understand Hall's effort to rethink the idea of the book by interspersing chapters of metadata between those covering central themes. But even a careful reader must wonder whether this is worth the loss of clarity and the consistent presentation of ideas. Nevertheless, Hall deserves credit for thinking broadly and deeply about what needs to be done once we recognize, as Hindman documents, that the online world is not inherently democratic.

The recognition that democracy requires oversight and regulation inspires *Codifying Cyberspace*, which reports on the results of a research project led by the Programme in

Comparative Media Law and Policy at the Centre for Socio-legal Studies at Oxford University. The book contains a collection of chapters and documents that describe structures and processes of self-regulation across most forms of media and telecommunications. Of course, self-regulation is a strange term suggesting, paradoxically, a system managed by its own participants and a set of governing structures and rules. American students of communication might look at the concept skeptically because they tend to associate the term with industry self-regulation, widely considered a euphemism for putting foxes in charge of chicken coops. But the authors of this volume mean something very different, mainly an assessments of those rules, principles and systems that govern arenas ranging from print journalism and the regulatory oversight of press councils to codes of conduct regulating the behavior of internet service providers. Recognizing quite correctly that 'the ideal of a pristine Internet, free from regulation, is a myth' (p. 294), the authors present the vast mix of approaches that bring together rules and laws, as well as public and private participants, to shape the governance of media. Wisely setting aside fruitless debates about whether media need regulation or whether it must come from either the public or private sectors, this collection serves as an excellent resource for considering the range of actually existing forms of media regulation that bring together a host of participants in an essentially political arena. Following both Hindman and Hall, it demonstrates that far from bringing about the end of politics, the world of digital code is indeed a politically contested terrain.

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