
Review: Can Technology Enhance Democracy? The Doubters' Answer

Reviewed Work(s): Democracy in a Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace by Anthony Wilhelm; Democracy.com? Governance in a Networked World by Elaine Kamarck and Joseph Nye; The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System by Richard Davis

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REVIEW ESSAYS

Can Technology Enhance Democracy? The Doubters' Answer

Democracy in a Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace. By Anthony Wilhelm. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000. Pp. 272. \$24.99.)

Democracy.com? Governance in a Networked World. By Elaine Kamarck and Joseph Nye. (New York: Hollis Publishing, 1999. Pp. 225. \$17.95.)

The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System. By Richard Davis (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. 224. \$18.95.)

The first books about the role of the Internet in political life were too favorable. More recent efforts at second thoughts, including Davis' *The Web of Politics*, Kamarck and Nye's *Democracy.com?*, and Wilhelm's *Democracy in a Digital Age*, are too somber.

Of the three, Wilhelm's *Democracy in a Digital Age* has the most thorough and sensible review of contemporary thought on the social construction of technology and the technological construction of society. He groups authors and pundits as neofuturists, dystopians, and technorealists and also considers Derrida, Heidegger, and Habermas. He offers a concise grouping of the ways public communication may be facilitated or inhibited by conducting politics online. First, public communication will be affected by the skills and resources that people bring to the process of engagement. Second, it will be affected by the distribution of computing resources across familiar categories of social inequality—race, gender, and class. Third, people will have to commit to a deliberative process that involves subjecting one's opinions to public scrutiny and validation. Finally, the technical design of software applications, network architecture, and hardware devices will affect the quality and quantity of political engagement online. Wilhelm's conclusion, in line with his peers', is that political communication online is unraveling the democratic character of the public sphere. Barriers are high to entry into the digitally mediated public sphere, the online public does not represent or reflect the American public, the speed of the networked democracy undermines the usefully slow pace of democratic decision making, and the public sphere itself is giving way to market pressures, pay-per-use services, and privately owned media environments. However, barriers to entry are actually dropping because of market pressures, the online

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public is becoming demographically representative, and speeding up the deliberative process may weaken the political power of social elites.

Kamarck and Nye's *Democracy.com?* is an edited collection of some creative philosophical papers and some number-crunching content analysis. Fans of their power and interdependence rubric will find familiar arguments in a concluding chapter about the international system of infopolitics. Two of the most interesting chapters in the collection are Pippa Norris' "Who Surfs?" and Kamarck's, "Campaigning on the Internet in the Elections of 1998." Norris groups ideas about how the Internet may affect politics into mobilization theories claiming that net use will facilitate and encourage new forms of political activism, and reinforcement theories suggesting that the net will strengthen, but not transform, existing patterns of political participation. Reviewing survey data from the Pew Research Center, she finds an overall pattern of reinforcement: that net-based political activists are already the most motivated, informed, and engaged members of the broad electorate. She does not find evidence of an independent net effect that draws the disinterested into politics, though the amount of explained variation in her models is very low and the Pew Surveys are simple and not informed by the developed literature on voter sophistication. Kamarck regards the 1998 electoral cycle as the first in which the Internet played a major campaign role. She found that most campaigns treated their Web sites as electronic brochures, and she rarely found candidates who linked to other sites, gave voter registration information, or updated content more than once a month.

Davis' message is that the Internet is a powerful research and publicity tool benefiting, for the most part, traditional activists. Although some observers thought the Internet would permit a resurgence in small, single-issue advocacy without many financial and intellectual resources, Davis finds that branding is as important in political marketing as it is in product marketing. Traditional political elites seem quite capable of adapting to and dominating the Internet age. Davis also devotes several pages to making interesting historical parallels with the role of other communication technologies in political campaigns.

All three books share several good qualities. First, all three take a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach, and their evidence is richer and their arguments are more convincing for it. Early work on the Internet was heavily dependent on chat-room and website content analysis. Only in combination with surveys, interviews, and experiments do these methods really help paint a picture about how political institutions and cultures are produced and consumed online. This is especially true given the dynamic categories of "the Internet" and "the Internet user." Second, all three books make a rigorous effort to explore fundamental inequalities of access that prevent certain groups of people from reaping any benefit from the World Wide Web. This commitment to highlighting inequality makes for a consistent message about why policy leadership on access and education is needed for many people to benefit from technological innovation.

All three books share several faults. First, most of the authors rely on “snapshot” data to back up statements like “the Internet is not like America” (Davis) while acknowledging that studying the social construction of the Internet is studying a dynamic process. Instead of relying on survey data from 1998, which are often the Pew media studies, the authors could have made greater efforts to map change over time. If they had done so, they would have found that the Internet is indeed becoming more like America, something not revealed by data from a single point in time. The gender gap has already disappeared, though diversity in class, race, and ethnicity are coming slowly to the online population.

Second, most of the authors who study the role of communications technology in politics focus exclusively on the public Internet. All of these texts do a good job of narrowing their area of interest with literature reviews of “deliberative democracy” debates and justifying their focus on the public Internet. Only Wilhelm addresses the social role of other technologies, intranets, and private databases, even though they are related to how the public Internet is used by both consumers and producers. They have important roles in the organization of political parties and candidate teams, and anyone interested in the role of technology in deliberation should be concerned with how these technologies affect both personal privacy and institutional transparency. At the very least, the authors should have justified their exclusive interest in the Internet.

Third, implicit in the analytical frames of all three texts is the idea that media access will have an additive effect. In other words, nonvoters with televisions, radios, and VCRs who simply add an Internet connection to their household are not likely to be more politically active because the Internet, despite its peculiarities, is really just one more medium. However, people do not exclusively read newspapers, watch TV, or use the Internet. People do supplement their media consumption with primary and secondary sources, and perhaps adding the Internet to a household complements a family’s informal research requirements in a way that simply adding the TV to the household of the 1950s did not. The interaction of media types may actually make a more informed and enthusiastic voter. This may be true because people are more likely to avail themselves of a research tool with a self-directed inquiry and because people may be more trusting of information from a web site. Explicitly testing for these kinds of interaction effects should have been a research priority.

Finally, these studies reflect the unfortunate trend in political science to jump right into new fields of inquiry with quantitative analysis. Although all the studies used several methods, rarely were they qualitative methods. As a result, their subject has been the average voter and the average politician. Politics is conducted by many kinds of people and organizations, and detailed ethnographic study and cross-case comparison of modern activists, lobbyists, or particular campaigns might find improvements in the quality of political discourse. It is one thing to try to count more voters; it is another to assess better voters. A better voter is more informed, is more motivated to actually participate, and has a contagious effect in activating his or her peers through engaging political

debate. What if these communication technologies improve democracy by introducing new ways for citizens to relate their preferences to political leaders? Theories in social science tend to come from rich, detailed investigation and only later are tested on simplified, aggregated data. This subject of inquiry is still at the stage where we can learn most from detailed ethnography and participant observation.

Clearly this literature is maturing, as the books coming out today are not edited collections but single-authored, comprehensively researched books with well-developed arguments. These three texts complement each other: Wilhelm offers great conceptual tools; Kamarck and Nye, statistical analysis; and Davis, historical perspective. But when these authors tackled the question of whether communications technology improves the quality and quantity of political discourse, should their answer have been simply “no”? Shouldn’t their answer have been “not yet”?

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Creating Democracies in the Modern World

Dragonwars: Armed Struggle and Conventions of Modern War. By J. Bowyer Bell. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999. Pp. xviii, 455. \$44.95 cloth.)

Saving Democracies: U.S. Intervention in Threatened Democratic States. Edited by Anthony James Joes. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999. Pp. ix, 248. \$59.95 cloth.)

Democracy at the Point of Bayonets. By Mark Peceny. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999. Pp. xiii, 254. \$55.00 cloth, \$12.00 paper.)

The end of the cold war brought with it predictions of a more peaceful international environment—the “end of history” as claimed by Francis Fukuyama and a “New World Order” in the words of President George Bush. To many scholars and policy makers, the post-cold war world created an opportunity for what Michael Doyle called a “pacific union.” This is seen in the Clinton administration’s policy of “democratic enlargement,” which codified a pro-liberalization U.S. foreign policy. Hindsight, as it often does, dashed the hopes of many prognosticators. It demonstrated that first, the end of the cold war was not a panacea for peace; second, the process of constructing the road to Kantian perpetual peace is full of potholes; and finally, the U.S. was and still is woefully unprepared politically, psychologically, and militarily for the burdens of facilitating stable democracies. In different ways, utilizing very diverse formats (and with widely) ranging levels of success, these three books examine elements of both