Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power. By Bruce Bimber. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xv+268. $65.00 (cloth); $22.00 (paper).

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Bruce Bimber is a professor of political science, before which he was employed by RAND in Washington, D.C. Raised in Silicon Valley, he took his degree in electrical engineering at Stanford. The influence of this position and background, weaknesses as well as strengths, is evident in the book under review. *Information and American Democracy* has the virtues of careful scholarship, impressive construction of argument, and a close eye to the detail of political affairs, while it is flawed by an over-emphasis on technology as a privileged variable in politics, a parochial focus, and a myopia as regards contributions to social thought beyond political science. The book appears to be a revised doctoral thesis, awkward to read, though its referencing and methodology are exemplary. It should also be read as a companion to Bimber's other volume (with Richard Davis), *Campaigning Online: The Internet in US Elections*, which is set to appear from Oxford University Press in 2003. This book, one assumes, is Bimber's attempt to set the scene for *Campaigning Online*, since it is historical and conceptual in approach, with the closing parts devoted to the here and now.

Information and American Democracy's premise is that information is "a universally important ingredient in political processes" (p. 18). This is uncontroversial, yet scholars have neglected it. Robert Dahl's *Democracy and Its Critics* (Yale University Press, 1989), from which Bimber draws inspiration, made a rare contribution. Alvin Gouldner (*The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* [Seabury, 1976]) made another, unfortunately overlooked by Bimber, perhaps because he came from outside Bimber's discipline. Bimber argues that information is important not just for the organization and operation of political affairs, but also because it shapes the character of politics.

The book suggests that several types of "information regimes" may be identified in the history of American politics, each of which has been "interrupted" by "information revolutions . . . which induce changes in the structure or accessibility of information" (p. 18). There are echoes of the Canadian Harold Innis here (though he merits no mention), and Bimber finds himself caught within a technological determinist framework of analysis. He is sensitive to difficulties with this and ingenuously raises them (but without mention of Bruno Latour!), but then reverts to the frame that technology is the main driver of information changes (and, by extension, of politics). Thus he discerns four periods of U.S. politics that were brought about by new information technologies. His discussion is sweeping, if compelling because of this.

1035

Bimber's information regimes—presented as epochs of stability as regards political structures, each lasting some 50 to 80 years– are heralded by information revolutions.In the 1820s–30s the Postal Service and newspaper business allowed, for the first time, the development of mass flows of political information and hence a genuinely national politics, but the corollary was a centralized system of "majoritarian politics." The period of industrialization in the 1880s–1910s led to considerable complexity and specialization of the information environment that accompanied the growth of railways, roads, cities, and business corporations, something which, claims Bimber, led politics to be dominated by the "organised interest group." The third information revolution, which occurred in the 1950s–70s was broadcasting, and it had two phases. The first weakened political parties and promoted the candidate who, through television especially, might appeal directly to mass audiences. The later phase evidenced more fragmentation with the coming of cable and satellite. Throughout, politics remained centralized and dependent on market-driven organizations capable of influencing policy making. The 1990s to the present is the epoch of the Internet. Bimber presents it as a time period in which there is information abundance, interactivity, and ease of access. Accordingly, the Internet announces a shift from interest group politics toward the primacy of "issue groups." The author presents this as the demise of political parties, and the emergence in their stead of postbureaucratic politics in which a plurality of campaigning groups come to the fore because contemporary information—and thereby political involvement—is cheap. In support of this argument (conventional in business theory), Bimber examines case studies such as the Million Mom March, the Libertarian Party, and the Coalition for Education to stress that issues such as civil rights, family, health, gun control, and the environment are of more import than political parties.

There is much of interest here for scholars. But the book as a whole is vitiated by parochialism as regards subject (the United States) and inept theorizations. Bimber gets to comparative analysis only in his final few pages, but nowhere is there recognition of what most strikes the overseas analyst—the exceptionalism of the United States: its extraordinarily narrow political spectrum and an information environment that is vapid (vide coverage of the Iraq War 2003), capable of generating inestimable amounts of information that are uninformative about matters of consequence. Bimber puts great faith in the Internet to rectify this situation. Attention to philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas or David Miller, to sociologists of new social movements such as Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci, or even to other information environments that are much poorer materially yet markedly superior informationally to the United States (e.g., France, Finland), would surely have encouraged the author to look further than, and more skeptically at, this conviction.

1036