

Shakuntala Banaji and David Buckingham, *The Civic Web: Young People, the Internet, and Civic Participation*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2013; 185 pp.: £20.95

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Given the hopes and hype regarding the civic potential of the web, the number of books containing primary empirical data of adequate breadth and depth is surprisingly small (see, for example, Loader, 2007; Loader and Mercea, 2012). Based on a major research project funded by the European Commission, this book by Shakuntala Banaji and David Buckingham makes an important contribution to our understanding of the role of the Internet in youth engagement. The book's key contribution lies both in its *spatial breadth* (case studies are drawn from seven European countries, including Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom) and in its *methodological scope*, offering a three-dimensional representation based on analysis of web content, production and youth narratives.

Somewhat ironically given its title, the book's single most powerful point is that there is no such thing as 'the' civic web (as there is probably no such thing as one 'youth'). Through a balanced and nuanced – forensic almost – dissection of the evidence, the authors provide us with a fascinating glimpse into Europe's online public sphere: a mosaic of diverse practices, agendas and interests; and a digital body politic still divided by factors such as class, religion and gender.

The Civic Web starts with a review of the claims regarding the web's impact on youth participation. It becomes clear quite early on that providing a definitive, or even comprehensive, account of the literature was not among the authors' intentions: the bibliography is somewhat thin and the narrative does not avoid the common pitfall of schematizing the literature in binary terms (positive vs negative effects of the Internet) only to subsequently question the role of technology altogether.

However, while the authors' staunch scepticism towards deterministic or even normative approaches initially seems to threaten the study's point, and to steer it towards a mere description of existing practices, Banaji and Buckingham deftly use the online case studies and interview material to demonstrate the salience of sociocultural, political and economic factors that shape our online interactions and user experience. Hence, they pose subtle but acute questions about the real extent to which civic media have an a priori engaging or empowering effect, and about the implications of participation fuelled by emotions or views that may not follow virtuous paths.

The chapter on producing the civic web takes a rare look behind the proverbial camera and highlights the constraints, resource limitations and realities of designing, launching and maintaining a civic website – an entire political economy and digital ecology often overlooked by those who theorize about the revolutionary effect of the web on the democratic process. The case studies analysed by Banaji and Buckingham reiterate the still critical role of 'old' media in raising online movements' profile, promoting their message and allowing them to reach out to mass audiences. Interestingly, this is a recurring phenomenon echoed not only by web producers but by active citizens themselves. In April 2014, online campaigning organization Avaaz polled its 34 million members (a membership base that any traditional political party or organization could only dream of)

on the best ways of strengthening the movement; with 78.26%, 'building a stronger media operation and a better known brand' was perceived as by far the most effective way (Avaaz, 2014).

The chapters on young people's narratives, perceptions and activities, both online and offline, offer further grounds for scepticism regarding the relevance of technology as a primary factor of engagement and underline the role of prior motivations and, in particular, of efficacy. While, as has been argued elsewhere (Gerodimos, 2012), efficacy includes the need to feel that one's actions have tangible material outcomes – a politically impossible and civically questionable goal – Banaji and Buckingham also identify a potentially significant non-instrumental aspect of efficacy, namely, the pleasure of *sharing* an activity or moment, and the ensuing sense of solidarity and common identity that comes out of that. The evidence presented in this study implies that it is very difficult for the Internet to replace or even match the depth of interpersonal relationships, social capital and trust achieved in offline settings. Hence, the authors reiterate the importance of spatially located communities, interactions and civic practices:

Most of the civic and political participation, especially sustained participation, that we identified appeared to *begin and end offline*. Such participation is based in local communities or communities of interest that exist in real physical spaces and thrive on face-to-face contact, even if the Internet has provided an additional space, a tool, or a focal point for aspects of this participation. (p. 88, emphasis in the original)

The third part of the book looks more closely at a diverse range of civic websites, often exploring uncharted territory and providing unique insights into the communicative practices of both highly centralized (including quite fundamentalist) as well as more self-organizing communities. While no research project is ever perfect or exhaustive, it might be useful for a future study to include the websites of cultural organizations (such as museums and arts spaces) as these are emerging as vital providers of both online and offline civic literacy, affordances and interactions, especially for children and younger people. Furthermore, while the authors rightly point out that the distinction between web 1.0 and 2.0 is to an extent artificial and exaggerated, there is little discussion of how social media, news organizations and highly personalized and integrated online spaces – including commercial ones – sponsor, shape, support, control or impede innovative civic phenomena or practices that are central to our political socialization, such as awareness (agendas and news values), interaction (depth, scope and opportunity to encounter difference) and mobilization.

The Civic Web might have benefitted from a more extensive and robust theoretical discussion that challenges fundamental assumptions inherent to our quest for civic engagement: for example, by pointing out the oxymoronic struggle of post-modern individualism and collective institutionalism within the concept of the 'actualizing citizen'; or by more explicitly articulating one of the emerging findings, namely, that political participation is increasingly meaningless and irrelevant to young people partly because it is a *process*, rather than a *product* (see also Gerodimos, 2008); or even by contextualizing the findings about web producers' struggle to catch users' attention with reference to the discussion on choice, information abundance and web personalization (e.g. Pariser, 2011).

Banaji and Buckingham demonstrate that digital empowerment is not necessarily benign – the same tools that can be used to give voice to under-represented minorities can also be used to preach hatred – and, in the last few pages, they get to playfully deconstruct the very concepts upon which they have based their analysis throughout the book. Yet, by remaining ambivalent towards any kind of normative configuration of civic participation, the authors refrain from providing the reader with a viable platform for the future, or at least a coherent statement of principles. Such a forward-looking agenda could be linked, for example, to the re-emergence of urban public space as a key domain (factor even) of political engagement and the principles of tolerance or co-existence (e.g. Bannister and Kearns, 2013) as key tenets of a civic culture. Even so, *The Civic Web* is an important addition to the literature on youth engagement – an informative and thought-provoking study that eloquently dissects the tapestry of Europe’s digital civic sphere and raises fascinating questions about the civic potential of the web and the age-old divides that still determine our digital experience.

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Jennifer Stromer-Galley, *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age*, Oxford University Press: New York, 2014; 224 pp.: \$27.95

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While there is little evidence on any election being the definitive ‘Internet election’, journalists and academics have certainly expended time and energy looking for the contest when digital communication technologies (DCT) in some way come of age. The problem with this line of investigation is that for the birth of the Internet age to match that of the television age, DCT are required to replace antecedent media; this is highly unlikely for the foreseeable future. Rather than replacing, what we are seeing is DCT given a series of core functions within political campaigns. It is the evolution of DCT from being a sideshow of limited functionality and importance to being at the core of political campaigning that Jennifer Stromer-Galley captures neatly in *Presidential*