Politics Online: Blogs, Chatrooms and Discussion Groups in American Democracy

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Politics Online: Blogs, Chatrooms and Discussion Groups in American Democracy

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Even those of us who attempt to follow the developing impact of the Internet as a part of our profession are often bewildered by the steady stream of applications that seem to be transformative, and yet are quickly replaced by the next big thing. Our readers and technical advisors at Berglund tells us we need to make better use of Wikis (audio and now video), Podcasts, RSS feeds—and their variants, XML feeds and Atoms—merely publishing in an electronic format is no longer enough.

However, having seen a number of big things burst upon the horizon and float—sometimes not so gently—to the ground, [1] we take a more measured approach at the Berglund Center. Many of these developments are variations upon a theme, means of becoming your own publisher, or radio announcer, or (with video wikis your own on-camera commentator). We are, of course, interested in larger audiences, but we are primarily interested in the significance or the meaning of these developments.

What does it mean when any of us can reach a larger audience in a few days than did Johannes Gutenberg, the putative inventor of the printing press, in his entire lifetime? [2]

It is clear that the most important Internet mediated development in the last several years has been the spread of blogging. Blog content, often with even less authority than entries in Wikipedia, the roll-your-own “encyclopedia” treated by many students as the first and last stop in Internet searching, has come to be a major source of news and analysis. [3] What are the
strengths and weaknesses of Blogs as the voice of the public?

We looked for a solid, substantial, yet brief, introductory work to the impact on politics of on-line fora. We found Richard Davis work, Politics Online. Davis, a Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University, brings a great deal of theoretical knowledge and at least three previous books on related subjects to the topic. [4]

The author focuses on what seems to us to be key questions, all relating to the motivations of participants and their impact in the political realm. The big question is, “Can online political discussion represent political opinion in the eyes of political leaders, candidates, journalists, and others who seek understanding of the public’s will? [5]

The big answer, unfortunately, according to Davis, is “No”. Davis, using a variety of statistical analyses, points out the many limitations facing those who would read significance into the materials found on blogs. Clearly, blog postings shape opinion, and clearly blog postings are opinion, but the larger issues of whose opinions, and for what purposes they are expressed, are far more problematic ones.

Any serious study of the political role of on-line forums should probably begin with this little book (164 pages) not because it is going to be the last word, but because Davis succinctly attacks many issues such as: lack of accountability, major differences between posters and lurkers (lurkers, those who read but do not post, it turns out, are largely more representative of the broad electorate than those who do post), distrust of politicians by the public, attempts to manipulate the public by politicians, and many others, all of which reduce the utility of blogs as a window into politics and political opinion.

One major value of this work is that throughout it is informed by and contributes to a major issue in any discussion of the Internet as political or analytical tool: What is the “electronic commons” and what should it be in a modern democracy? The bibliography and notes in Politics Online are themselves valuable tools in exploring this issue.

The book has some limitations. It is an uneasy blend of a scholarly treatise studded with tables, charts, complex explanations of statistical techniques, and an attempt to introduce a more general audience to important issues. It demands a lot of the reader, but it also delivers a great deal.


[2] Revealingly, a Google search on “Gutenberg” will produce 30,400,00 hits. Many are about the individual and his works, notably, of course, the Gutenberg Bible. However, the top two sites are on the digitalization of printed texts, “Project Gutenberg,” found at: http://www.gutenberg.org/ which now makes available to the reader 18,000 different free
digitized texts. It was probably centuries before that many titles were available in print following the invention of the printing press.


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