

The Myth of Digital Democracy. Matthew Hindman. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, 181 pp. \$22.95 (paperback)

Digital Citizenship, The Internet, Society and Participation. Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Ramona S. McNeal. Cambridge MA, London: The MIT Press, 2008, 221 pp. \$19.00 (paperback)

Last year two books about the perspectives of so-called digital democracy in the US have appeared that both are based on solid empirical research, one of them being sceptical and the other more optimistic about these perspectives. A comparison review of both could give a good overview of current answers to the question whether the Internet has democratized American politics.

Both books do not clearly define digital democracy, presumably implying that this term refers to the political uses of the Internet. Digital citizenship is defined as the ability to participate in society online by Mossberger et al. These authors do not only investigate digital citizenship in politics but also in economic opportunities and in prevailing forms of communication in society.

Let's start with the master of debunking, Matthew Hindman. He questions and largely demolishes popular assumptions about the Internet that are taken for granted by too many average Americans, journalists and even scientists. Popular views are that the Internet gives ordinary citizens more voice and that it gives them a degree of empowerment never known before. The second most popular idea is that previously inactive citizens are recruited in political activism on and by the Internet. Another common view is that blogs expand the social and ideological diversity of voices in the media. Some even suggest that blogging displaces the 'elite' or the 'old' media. The Internet as a whole is conceived as a narrowcasting medium that eliminates broadcasting as central production and dissemination of the news and political views and that vanishes the traditional gatekeepers in the mass media. Finally it is often assumed that on the Internet everybody can find the information one is looking for and find an ear for one's own information.

Hindman opposes these views with an extremely extensive and laborious analysis of an own sample of almost three million American Web pages and existing traffic data of others to look for their producers, contents, links and audiences. So, he concentrates on political discourse, on content and on audiences. He does not focus on access, political motivation and effects in the political system.

The first thing he observes is that political traffic is only a tiny portion of Web usage. In 2007 it was 0.12 percent to be exact, while news and media sites covered 2,9 and adult pages 10,5 percent. Further, he discovers that liberals dominate the audience for politics online; they outpace conservatives by a wide margin. Strong democrats are more likely to visit political websites; so are strong Republicans though by a smaller margin. Democratic-leaning independents and weak Democrats show significantly higher levels of political Web usage, while Republican-leaning independents and weak Republicans are not different from true independents.

While media have portrayed online politics as a youthful phenomenon, Hindman finds in Hitwise data that in 2007 only 11 percent of young people between 18 and 34 visited political websites as compared to 25 percent by people between 45 and 54 and 32 by people of 55 and above.

However, the most conspicuous observation of Hindman is his exposure of *Googlearchy*: the rule of the most heavily linked. The link structure of the Web limits the content that citizens actually see. Search engines help to keep the attention of the public highly concentrated. The link structure of the Internet used by search engines puts the most popular on top of the list and average users only use the first hits on the list, in this way reinforcing the concentration and the winner gets all patterns on the Internet.

Users themselves contribute to this concentration by shallow and unskilled use of search engines for news and political information. They primarily seek for familiar sites and resources. So, most opportunities of retrieving new political information the Internet offers in theory, are annihilated in practice. The author accuses those who advocate the open, accessible and peer-to-peer nature of the Internet to neglect this deeper linking structure of the Internet that works according to a power law: a few sites attract the vast majority of traffic while most sites draw almost no traffic.

These ideas of a power law and of the rich-are-getting-richer phenomenon on the Internet are not new in the scientific literature on network theory and analysis, but Hindman has given them a solid empirical basis. In doing so, he contributes to the advanced methodology of automated techniques for cataloguing, categorizing and classifying Web pages. He also applies four metrics of concentration and (in)equality of traffic and audience shares on the Internet, the famous Gini-coefficient being one of them.

Analyzing concentration of traffic and audiences on the Internet the author draws the striking and alarming conclusion that online concentration is bigger than that of the traditional media. In 2006 news and media sites revealed a Gini concentration figure of

.88, political sites of .85 and all Web sites of .76. Newspaper circulation had only .69, magazines .70 and radio audience .53. The Top 10 of political sites reached 31 percent of the audience share and news and media sites 29, while the Top 10 of newspapers received 19, magazines 27 and radio 7 percent.

At the other side of political and news site supply Hindman observes a large number of less popular sites. For every interest there is some offer on the Internet. This is known as Anderson's long tail. Contrary to Anderson and others Hindman asserts that it is simply not true that the smallest outlets taken together get most of the traffic. "They have made the long tail into the entire dog" (p. 135) exaggerating its significance. All of them attract some attention and they grow, but they remain fragmented and insignificant as compared to the top sites. According to Hindman the most striking phenomenon is 'the missing middle' (sites with a medium audience) between the concentrated head and the long tail. So, while many have worried about fragmentation on the Internet, Hindman is concerned about concentration.

Concentration also occurs in the expansion of political blogging. More than a million Americans have become political bloggers. Tens of millions read them regularly or occasionally. Blogs have become one of the major resources of political information. Yet, "only a few dozen have more readers than does a small-town newspaper" (p. 128). More than 95 percent of blogs is read by almost no-one. And their creators overwhelmingly are well-educated white male professionals: politicians, business elites, technical experts and journalists. Most of them certainly are not ordinary citizens. Hindman claims that they only speak for themselves. They do not aggregate information and opinion from a larger part of the population as there is no middle range of political blogs and sites in terms authorship and readership to derive from.

The most general conclusion of the book is in its last words. "It may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard." (p. 142). Does that also go for politicians and election campaigns? Hindman starts his book with an analysis of the primary presidential campaign of Howard Dean in 2004. He was one of the first to use the Internet for fundraising, volunteer recruitment and advertising on a massive scale. The author continues with a comparable analysis of the Obama presidential campaign but unfortunately was not able to finish it because the book appeared before the end of the show. A comparison of both campaigns would have been valuable because Obama succeeded and Dean failed. Now he only suggests that the electability of the candidates, that Obama had and Dean did not, is still decisive despite all Internet aids.

Hindman's observation is that the Internet has changed campaigns more than votes. It has definitively changed the art of recruiting and organizing that has become more inclusive because a much larger part now consists of small donations. Additionally, it has turned the organization of campaign volunteers into potential 'grass-root' mobilization engaging more citizens than before.

Despite all these critical observations of the use of the Internet in political communication that are responsible for the title of his book, Hindman does not give a clear answer to the question whether this medium has democratized American politics. He leaves the door open for a more positive answer declaring that Internet politics is not just politics as usual. "The Internet has made campaign financing more inclusive, and allowed broad, diffuse interests to organize more easily. For motivated citizens, vast quantities of political information are one click away" (p. 142). The reason for this indecisive answer is not that the Internet is immature - it is in its adolescence according to author- the main reason is that the book is not well organized. It lacks a systematic design, let alone a substantial framework or a model of causes and effects. As the book jumps from one topic to another it is not particularly clear for the reader that Hindman does not focus on the input of the democratic process (Internet access and participation) but on parts of the output: what information citizens actually get and whether their voices are being heard on the Internet. Neither does he concentrate on the effects on the American political system as a whole that would justify the general title of his book.

Compared to the first book, the focus of attention of the second is clear. Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal concentrate on the input of the democratic process in terms of access and participation. Though, similarly, their main title is very general: digital citizenship. The authors observations and conclusions are much more optimistic in terms of democratization than Hindman's. "The results clearly demonstrate that the Internet contributes to the development of civic engagement among individuals and fosters political participation" (p. 144). Results are derived from a secondary analysis of the 2000 American National Election Studies survey and of two Pew Internet and American Life surveys, one of the mid-term elections of 2002 and one of the presidential elections of 2004. The research aim was to investigate the effect of three modes of online participation on civic engagement and on traditional political participation, primarily on voting. The three modes are 1) reading news on the Internet, 2) sending and receiving political e-mails and 3) participating in political chat rooms.

Authors find that respondents who took part in any of the three online activities were significantly more likely to report voting, controlling for other factors (age, income, education, gender, partisanship and state contextual factors). For similar individuals who regularly read online news the probability of voting increases by between 16 and 26 percent, 16 for those who also rely on television and newspaper news, 21 for those who rely on newspapers, but not TV and 26 percent for those who only read news online. E-mail has an even greater influence on voter turnout as it increases between 21 and 39 percent, depending on other forms of media consumption. The association between political chat room participation and voting is equally strong: between 21 and 39 percent. These positive effects only appear in presidential elections, not in the mid-term election of 2002. Authors explain this difference by suggesting “that the Internet may not be able to overcome a lack of interest associated with low salience political events such as midterm elections” (p. 82).

This brings us to the most important weakness of this study. Mossberger et al. have waged an admirable effort in controlling for spurious correlations by elaborate multivariate regression models, but the most important one, political interest or motivation is weakly controlled for. First, the 2000 study did not include a political interest variable. In the 2002 study political interest is only controlled by a single item/question: a 4-point ordinal scale for responses to the question “How much thought did you give to the midterm election?” This can hardly be considered a full and valid operational definition of political interest.

Control for political motivation is particularly important because a well-known statement is that the politically involved use the Internet more for political participation and that they increase their involvement as compared to the non-involved in this way. It might be that political motivation causes both more political Internet use and more voter turn-out with the positive effects summarized above. Mossberger et al. admit themselves that low interest remains a barrier for participation in U.S. elections, and that the Internet is unlikely to compensate sufficiently for such things as uncompetitive congressional races (p. 144).

These controls and the general aim of this study are generated by the drive to prove that the Internet *in itself* contributes to the democratization of politics. Equally, Hindman tries to demonstrate that particular characteristics of the Internet are detrimental for democratization. I think that this drive has haunted Internet research too much. It is very difficult to prove that a technology in itself has particular social effects. All too often it is

thought that the Internet offers some kind of *technological fix* for basic problems of behavior and society, such as a lack of citizen engagement or political interest. It is *the use* of technology in particular social contexts that creates the effects.

Without defending an instrumental view of technology – as this view ignores the unexpected, so-called second order social effects of technology- it can be argued that the Internet is an increasingly important tool for all kinds of activities in society. And that it has simply become necessary to reach particular populations, first of all young people. This is why Mossberger et al. are right in calling Internet access a vital part of contemporary citizenship. And why it does not surprise that it has become an important tool for political information and communication. Whether the Internet supports political participation more than traditional media is difficult to prove despite all regression analyses in the *Digital Citizenship* book. The Internet has a number of enabling opportunities and drawbacks (*cf.* Hindman). Whether they are realized still depends on the social and political context, the motivation of users and several demographics such as educational level, age, income and ethnicity.

The importance of the tool also is the reason why the digital divide in terms of physical access, digital skills and different use of the Internet still is one of the most important conditions of the democratization of American politics using digital aids. Hindman claims that “the online public sphere already is a de facto aristocracy dominated by those skilled in the high deliberative arts” (p. 139). Contrary to Mossberger et al. he does scarcely pay attention to the solution of this inequality problem, that could be responsible for the most important myth of digital democracy.

Hindman and partly also Mossberger et al. emphasize the output of digital participation (audience shares and voter turnout) and pay insufficient attention to the input of political motivation and insight. It may be true that ordinary citizens have difficulties in being heard on the Internet, but it might be equally true that they learn a lot by reading online news, by participating in online discourse and in being mobilized for online and offline campaigns. Perhaps these learning effects are the most important stimuli for democratization in the long run.

Has the Internet already democratized American politics? So far, changes are small. I see no significant transformation of the American political system on account of Internet use anyway. The Internet era in politics is just starting. Hindman is right in his conclusion that changes are bigger in election campaigns than in voting. The political uses

of the Internet have significantly changed fundraising, campaign recruitment and organization and political advertizing.

In Europe people think that the Obama campaign has revolutionized politics forever. In fact, I think Hindman is right in stating that the Obama campaign was hardly innovative. It was an almost perfectly orchestrated centralized campaign “while empowering the bottom to make a difference” (p. 37). The biggest expenditures were for broadcast advertizing, campaign staff and travel costs. Obama did not win the presidency by means of the Internet but by his personal quality as a candidate attracting many new voters. He was saved by his reaction to the credit crisis at the start of September 2008, just two months before the election when he was at the losing end according to the polls. At that time his young volunteers, partly recruited on the Internet were attracting votes going door by door, handing out leaflets and organizing political rallies. Just like they would have done in the nineteenth century.

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