

Book Review

A research agenda for digital politics, by William E. Dutton: A review by Karl Löfgren

A Research Agenda for Digital Politics. William E. Dutton, ed. (2020) London: Edward Elgar.

Following the introduction of the Internet into the public domain in the mid 1990s, we have in the past 25 years witnessed not only an explosion in publications, conferences and even chairs fully committed to the research field of digital politics, the default units of observations for students of political communication, electoral studies, opinion studies and social movements are now by and large digital. When this reviewer recently attended a workshop organised by the political communication network under the New Zealand Political Studies Association, the real outlier among the contributions was a paper solely focussing on the role of the ‘old’ mass media (newspaper, TV and radio) during the 2020 general election campaign. The remainder of the papers focussed on social media platforms and other digital channels in politics.

A recent research agenda volume edited by William Dutton on digital politics seeks to not only evaluate the progress made in academic research over the past decades, but also to look forward and raise some of the future agenda items. Compared to the traditional academic ‘handbook’ the research agenda format works extraordinarily well. Rather than just reviewing and summarizing the extant research literature, this format emphasises the main future issues and challenges for the scholarly community.

The editor has managed to bring together a really comprehensive selection of contributions, which albeit an Anglophone bias in the location of the authors, represent some of the more esteemed scholars within the field. The title contains 18 chapters divided into five sections: transformation and continuities; campaigns and elections; institutional transformations; institutional, symbolic and communicative actions; and finally reshaping democratic processes and discourse. Even though the editor operates with a rather broad definition of digital politics, the choice of contributions reveals a clear preconception of ‘politics’ as in ‘party politics’ (including arenas for political discourse, mobilisation, participation, campaigns and deliberation), and to some extent normative issues (e.g. privacy, citizenship and human rights). Only one of the contributions (Dubois and Martin-Bariteau) refers to the public administration, or e-government, side of politics, including the role of algorithmic decision-making.

The style of the different contributions is pretty coherent starting with a succinct, but efficient, review of the historical research questions within each topic, a review of the academic literature and finally some forward-looking towards possible future research areas. Most of the contributions are written in a sombre style with few, if any, references to hyperbolic claims and aspirational promises. Digital politics was for many years predominantly a promise about a better (more inclusive, transparent, engaging etc.) future beyond the stagnant and detached spectator democracy of the western world, rather than an empirical phenomenon to be studied. Based on isolated cases (‘projects’), or simply theoretical speculations about what wonders (or misadventures) the embedded properties of the new technology could generate, scholars projected certain trajectories for the future of democratic processes and institutions. The contributions of

this book demonstrate that the research field is now clearly beyond that phase, and that there now exists a solid body of knowledge based on a multitude of empirical studies.

There is no space here to review all the different contributions and present the abundance of sage recommendations for future research. I have chosen to pick up some of the broader messages of the book.

With respect to the empirical focus, it is clear that the optimism that characterised scholars studying digital politics 20–25 years ago, has taken some heavy turns by the actual evolution of, in particular, social media platforms. While few of the contributions exhibit pitch-black dystopian visions of the future of digital media and politics, it is clear that factors such as online incivility, manipulations of social media campaigns, and examples of violations of human rights have highlighted that digital politics is far from what the founding fathers and mothers of the scholarly field expected, and this is now beginning to become visible. First of all, there is an ongoing movement away from focussing on the more ‘progressive’, ‘deliberative’ and ‘speculative’ sensational events (e.g., social media use during the Arab spring, or new types of political parties extensively using information technologies for organisation and communication such as the Italian five-star movement) to study the more mundane sides of for example, party digital communication and interaction, and also to study digital politics among right-wing and populist supporters. One of the contributors (Karpf) actually asks the (perhaps impious) question whether the huge scholarly interest for new forms of more democratic uses of digital media is the result of the scholarly community’s political bias towards ‘progressive’ ideas, or whether it has just been a chase for media headlines. Although it is pointless to raise a discussion about normative biases among individual academics, it would perhaps benefit the research community to sometimes be more open to encounter divergent forms of digital politics rather than just the ‘young and cool’. Second, many of contributions reflect on the ethnocentricity of the research field with an abundance of both authorships and empirical examples from the Western world (and with China on the rise), and in particularly cases and discussions from the UK and the US (‘Brexit and Trump’). Although this geographic bias is endemic within most social science fields, it is clear that some parts of the world are white spots on the map in the academic literature on digital politics.

Regarding the *methodological* direction in the extant research literature, a few contributions express a sense of fatigue with the current obsession around quantitative data analytics (or big data) based on collected social media content, and in particularly Twitter data, which has turned into an academic industry of mechanical number crunching of tweets and hashtags. The easy access to data, and the development of tools for analysing social media content, have resulted in a situation where research questions are based on available data sources, rather than the other way around. The authors of the book all advocate a more widespread use of mixing quantitative and qualitative methods to enhance the quality of the research, and to go beyond what is visible on the screen.

In terms of *theory*, the book shows that while there is still an adherence to the usual suspects of political communication theorisation (Habermas, Lyotard etc.), there is a growing bulk of theorisation within the field which manages to encapsulate the certain features of the new media (such as e.g., breaking down the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication on social media). The individual contributions to the book also reflect how studies of in particularly social media requires inputs from disciplines such as sociology, ethnography, law, economics, and actually some knowledge about the technology *per se*.

If I should say anything critical book about this book, it would probably be that there are so many more topics that could have been covered. What really heartened me while I reading the book was the generally self-critical and reflective approach to the academic field. It would be refreshing if the e-government scholarly community at some point dared to actually reflect on some of their *modus operandi*. Finally, I would like to recommend all postgraduate students working with digital politics to at least quickly browse

through it. Not only will they be given a quick update on the history of the research topic, they will also be provided with a clear guidance where the gaps in the body of knowledge are.

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