

## Book Review

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**The Internet and Politics: Citizens, Voters and Activists**, edited by Sarah Oates, Diana Owen and Rachel Gibson (Routledge, 2006)

“The Internet and Politics” is an edited collection of case studies arising from papers written for a workshop on the changing media and civil society, held at the 2003 European Consortium of Political Research. This is a timely book, which on the one hand demonstrates the maturity of ‘internet studies’ and on the other highlights potentially fruitful areas for further research.

The overview chapter authored by Oates and Gibson initially locates the Internet as a new component of the ‘media mix’, suggesting a rather reductionist focus on the Internet as merely a communications tool between politicians and citizens, underplaying its organisational potential. The subsequent discussion and following chapters extend this definition to bring a wider range of perspectives on the meaning of the Internet for participation and citizenship.

The book addresses the central questions of whether the Internet is qualitatively different from other media, and whether evidence suggests that it has had a positive impact on civic society through wider provision of information, enhanced communication between citizens and government, and improved transparency. A third question permeating each of the chapters is that of the position of the Internet as either a dependent variable shaped by existing forces, or an independent variable capable of changing significant relationships within the polity. On this question it could be argued that some chapters are under-informed by debates around the interaction between technologies and their institutional settings.

One indicator of the overall maturity of the approach is the consideration of the level of analysis, so that it is made clear that the study of the broadcast of political information, for example by a political party, is quite distinct from the study of how that information is digested by recipients. The book makes the important assertion that it is impossible to understand the meaning of a website in isolation – online manifestations of a political actor have to be considered in the context of that actor’s overall communications strategy in order to understand the distinct contribution of the Internet to participation, mobilisation and citizenship. Chapters are concerned with four central themes; the role of the Internet in promoting civil society in advanced industrial democracies, analysis of the extent to which the Internet acts as a catalyst for ‘outsider’ groups (particularly terrorists), assessment of the Internet as a democratising or oppressing tool in authoritarian states, and finally the development of central research questions and methodologies for Internet studies.

The chapter by Owen addresses the role of the Internet in facilitating youth civic engagement in the US, arguing that while young citizens are failing to engage in traditional forms of participation, the ‘DotNet’ generation are using the Internet as a conduit for significant political activism. The chapter discusses evidence that young people have been using the Internet both to monitor conventional political processes such as election campaigns, but also to engage actively in politics. Data show that young people consult an eclectic range of online information sources produced by a wide variety of actors from politicians to ordinary bystanders, and that significant numbers use the online environment to express their opinions and become active in campaigns. Owen also argues that young people are at the forefront of using the online world to facilitate offline ‘real world’ political action, drawing a link between the organisational

connections made online, and street protest actions such as those that have accompanied meetings of the World Trade Organization.

Jensen uses the Minnesota E-democracy programme to address important questions as to the nature of online activists; asking whether the online world is capable of bringing the marginalised into the political process, or whether online activists are simply those who are politically active in the real world and have utilised another channel for their activity. While Owen argues in her chapter that the Internet can promote the participation of those cut off from traditional processes, Jensen argues in this case that participants come from sections of society already politically active. The chapter also considers the factors that determine online participation compared to those that determine traditional participation. Referring to Bourdieu's (1984) conception of economic, cultural and social capital, Jensen argues that social capital, in terms of a self defined 'citizen status' is the most significant factor here.

Lusoli and Ward turn the focus towards the role of the Internet in mobilising mass protests, taking a bottom-up perspective in an analysis of data provided by members of the Countryside Alliance in the UK. The discussion addresses the profile of 'online' members, their use of the Internet and their attitudes on its role in facilitating participation. They conclude that the Internet can be related to a widening of participation through engagement with a wider demographic than that characterised by the traditional membership, but note that this occurred within a context of an organisational strategy of widening the membership. The contribution of technology, therefore, has to be understood in terms of the organisational and institutional norms. In the same way, they also argue that while the Internet can be related to a deepening of participation in terms of its role in facilitating activism, it has not played a role in bringing intra-organisational democracy.

Wright maintains the emphasis on context with a discussion on how design of government-run discussion boards is related to the development of social capital. Whereas Lowndes and Wilson (2001) have offered a framework that identifies 'opportunities for public participation' as one element shaping the creation of social capital, Wright argues that it is not just the provision of participation facilities and whether they are responsive that is important, but also the design of those facilities and the extent to which this allows and encourages participation. Therefore, an interface can be designed in such a way as to facilitate debate, for example by arranging messages in a coherent, structured manner, with clearly framed debates accompanied by good explanatory notes, moderated by transparent and appropriate policies. Reporting an analysis of two discussion boards, hosted by Cumbria County Council and Suffolk County Council, Wright concludes that while good design is one factor at play in the question of how and why people participate, but agrees with Wilhelm (2000) that it will not, by itself, result in an increased volume of participation.

Conway addresses the theme of the extent to which the Internet acts as a catalyst for 'outsider' groups in her analysis of Hizbollah's Internet strategy. Utilising Szafranski's conception of 'neocortical warfare' (1997), defined as a component of 'perception management' which 'attaches more importance to communicating with other minds than to targeting objects', the chapter looks at how Hizbollah utilises the Internet to convey information to the citizenry in those states where it takes action. Conway argues that such 'public diplomacy' has undergone significant change as a result of the information revolution, so that the term 'cybercortical warfare' is now appropriate to describe the practice of public diplomacy via the Internet, where groups use the Internet to 'offensively shape the information environment'. Conway argues that Hizbollah aims their websites at the citizens of Israel and to English speaking audiences more generally, and have capitalised on an effective web presence as a component of their power base.

In his chapter on the Internet and terrorism in Northern Ireland, Reilly argues that in addition to the overt communication assessed by Conway, the other dimension to terrorist use of the Internet is covert communication to plan and perpetrate acts of terror. However, the thrust of the analysis is to determine whether websites that are related to terrorist groups vary significantly in form from other political or civil websites. His analysis concludes that not only do terrorist-related websites not differ significantly from those of other groups, but also that they do not seem to bring any additional dimension to the terrorist threat.

The next section of the book examines the role of the Internet in authoritarian states. March provides an analysis of the use of the Internet by political parties in Russia, where a low level of adoption by parties parallels the restricted diffusion of the Internet in Russian society. The chapter identifies extensive potential for the Internet to improve civil society and party development in a democratising state. However, the overall outcome of the analysis suggests that the Internet amplifies the existing distortions of the party system, where parties serve as vehicles of a political elite rather than aggregate and articulate the political opinions of the electorate. It is notable that the emphasis in Russian party websites is for information broadcasting, in a manner akin to online newspapers, rather than for narrow-casting of a specific message to carefully targeted audiences. It is posited that this tendency might form an important contribution to a pluralisation of the media as a whole in Russia.

Schmidt maintains the focus on Russia with an analysis of the role of the Internet in supporting trans-national advocacy networks, examining the effects on the activities of Russian non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The chapter utilises qualitative data to assess the realities of NGO work and web-based communication within an overall operating context of authoritarian governance characteristic of the Putin era. The study concludes that there is a significant divide between 'connected' and 'unconnected' groups which mirrors a divide between those groups that have achieved funding and those that have not. Evidence suggests that funding provides access to technology and improves the networking and communications abilities of Russian NGOs, whereas unconnected groups are often unable to establish contacts and access information necessary to receive such funding and assistance.

The contribution of the Internet to democratic transformation is also addressed in the contribution by Kasnoboka and Semetko, which locates the Internet as a mechanism through which the state, judiciary and media in Ukraine can be held to account. The chapter discusses the case of the murder of an opposition Internet journalist in 2000, and seeks to identify the similarities and the differences between the ways that the different news media, including the Internet, covered a number of protest events. It is argued that a lack of coverage of these protests in the offline media created an opportunity for the Internet to achieve the status of an authoritative source of information in the Ukraine.

The final chapter revisits debates on the democratising potential of cyberspace and the extent to which the Internet represents a new virtual public sphere. Rather than simply evaluating the usage and potential of the Internet as a forum for public deliberation, the question asked is whether such a public sphere could be self-evolving or whether it requires to be engineered. The analysis concludes that the core requirement for a functioning public sphere is citizenship, and so in order to engineer a successful online public sphere, an online public must also be engineered to populate it.

This is a diverse collection of chapters but one that successfully engages with the core themes of promotion of civil society, the role of the Internet for marginalized and excluded groups, and the place of the Internet in authoritarian societies. The overarching contribution of the book is its emphasis firstly on clarity in terms of the level of analysis used, and secondly on the need for systematic study grounded in

good evidence. In both respects it forms a significant contribution to the body of knowledge, and provides fertile material for further work.

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**Implementing and Managing eGovernment. An International Text**, by Richard Heeks, 2006, Sage Publications, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi, p. 293.

With this book Richard Heeks has taken up the challenge to write and publish one of the very first textbooks in the rapidly emerging subject field of e-government. Starting each chapter with key points to be learned, followed by a wealth of checklists, tables, definitions, explanations, approaches, and not to forget boxes in which a whole range of practical e-government examples from around the world are presented, Heeks undertakes an enormous effort to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible about how to understand, implement and manage e-government systems in public sector organisations. Moreover each chapter is concluded by presenting an elaborate set of activities for different learner target groups: Shorter In-Class Activities, Assignment Questions, and Practitioner Exercises; some chapters additionally even containing several eGovernment Project Development Exercises.

In the introductory section Heeks reveals and further explains the following five major themes running throughout discussions presented in his book (p. 1):

1. “*eGovernment hype is not e-government reality*: behind the rose-tinted façade of press releases lies the truth that e-government is difficult to implement, hard to manage, and often fails. This book sees the positive potential of new technology, but also exposes the real obstacles.”
2. “*eGovernment systems are information systems*: they handle data and hope to deliver information to support decisions and transactions. This book’s understanding of e-government and its management is thus based on an understanding of information and information systems.”
3. “*eGovernment systems sit within a broader context*: of people, management, public agencies, IT vendors, politics, culture, and so on. Not only does e-government affect these factors; it is also affected by these factors. Ignore them, and they will swing in to derail your plans. This book’s discussion of managing e-government therefore takes account of the broader context.”
4. “*eGovernment is not e-business*: you cannot simply transplant private sector ideas into the public sector. This book recognises the difference between these sectors, and tries to draw out the particular challenges that face public sector projects.”
5. “*eGovernment may best be implemented and managed by hybrid methods*. . . Not a panacea, but a way through some of the tensions that beset e-government.”

These five major themes seem to be more than major “lessons to be learned” for students and other readers; after reading the book you may get the impression that Heeks has been struggling quite a bit himself, particularly with themes 1, 3 and 5. Theme 2 may offer the key explanation for this struggle: Heeks understands e-government from a perspective which is narrowed to information systems (IS) and information management (IM). As far as the phenomenon of e-government can be understood

in these terms, Heeks appears to feel highly comfortable in teaching about an enormous variety of aspects of importance for this restricted e-government perspective, the “safe” inner circles of what Heeks calls ‘the full model of e-government systems’ (Table 1.2, p. 5). Examples of main topics covered by Heeks are for instance e-government strategic planning, public data quality and public data quality problems, e-government system lifecycle and project assessment, e-government system design, e-government risk assessment and mitigation, and e-government system construction, implementation and beyond. Moreover, Heeks seeks to offer people coming from this more technical IS/IM background a broader perspective, an “i-opener” perhaps, on what e-government may include. He does so especially through discussions of topics such as what kind of approach should be used to manage e-government systems, centralised, decentralised or “hybrid”? (putting much emphasis on benefits of using a so-called “hybrid”, third way approach regarding e-government project management); core management issues for e-government, such as position of the IT function in the organisation, people, “pelf” or financial aspects of e-government, e-government project management approaches, and politics; and, in his final chapter, uniting the ‘E’ and the ‘Government’ of e-government through hybrids.

However as soon as Heeks enters into the outer circles of his full e-government systems model he starts to feel uncomfortable in teaching about the less rational, ‘softer’ and therefore hard-to-grasp integrated elements of implementing and managing e-government systems. Consequently, Heeks’ concept of ‘hybrid’, although restricted by Heeks in its meaning to the acronym POSSET (ie Philosophy, Organisational level, Stakeholders, Sector, Extent of Change, and Technology), unfortunately remains in the abstract in seeking to steer a middle way on each of the acronym’s e-government dimensions. One of his assignments reveals Heeks’ uneasiness with the “government” of “e-government” (p. 237):

“You have a simple task to complete: stand up and write your name down on a piece of paper. The only complication is that – at the same time as you try to write your name – you must pat your head, count backwards from 10 to 0, and dance. Reflect on your experience to understand what happens if you try to change several ITPOSMO (*Information, Technology, Processes, Objectives and values, Staffing and skills, Management systems, and Other resources, ed*) dimensions at once on an e-government project.”

Heeks ends his book with a following repeated statement from Strassman:

“Those seeking to lead e-government forward in the remainder of the 21st century are better served studying the works of Machiavelli and Sun Tzu than in reading the latest IT magazines and textbooks.” (p. 272) – a statement which hints at the use of an alternative perspective to better understand e-government. Although Heeks’ effort with this textbook, using an information systems perspective to understand e-government, should certainly not be underestimated, there seems to be room in the e-government domain for other textbooks using a public administration perspective, for instance, to support teaching about this complex but most interesting phenomenon of e-government.

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