Book Reviews

Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communications Technologies, Andrew Chadwick (2006), Oxford University Press, Oxford, Paperback, ISBN 0195177738.

"Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communications Technologies" is foremostly concerned with whether "the internet, by reconfiguring the relations between states and between citizens and states, (is) causing fundamental shifts in patterns of governance?" (p. 1) (Reviewer's parenthesis). However, in a book that is intended for a mainly student readership it is the theoretical, empirical, and evaluative journey travelled in seeking the answer to the question that is considerably more valuable than the answer itself. This is fortunate: for the question is ambitious, while Chadwick's answer is necessarily measured. The journey, though, engages with highly germane themes and debates that are each worthy of examination in their own right. When combined within one book, however, these powerfully convey to students the reach of 'Internet politics' throughout our social, economic, and political fabric, including comparatively on the world stage; and the actual and potential implications that lie therein.

For readers unfamiliar with the technical workings of the Internet, the explanation provided in the introductory section of the book is concise, clear, and sufficient for purpose. In the first main section of the book, the emergence and subsequent development of the Internet is historically situated. The chapter examining "Access, Inclusion, and the Digital Divide" is revealing, and should be thought-provoking for students for whom the technology may have a 'taken-for-granted' aspect in their everyday lives. Relevant, key theoretical and conceptual perspectives prepare the ground for the substantive discussions in sections two and three of the book. In section two, Chadwick examines how and to what extent the Internet is "impacting" upon core political institutions such as interest groups, political parties, and government. The question whether the Internet is re-configuring power relationships infuses these chapters as well as those that follow in section three, where the discussion centres upon issues that include governance and control of the Internet; surveillance, privacy, and security; and the production and distribution of news. The book concludes with an evaluation of the future of Internet politics in the short to medium term.

I have two main criticisms of the book in respect of its substantive content. These are criticisms that are particularly important for a book whose intended audience includes undergraduates. Firstly, the discussion running through the book conveys strongly 'techno-determinist' overtones couched in the form of technologies having 'inherently political properties'. However, the descriptions brought forward of shifts in 'how politics is done' are overwhelmingly suggestive of social and political shaping in the form of human interventions. Where, how, and to what extent observed changes in the nature of politics are the outcome of political properties inherent within technology needs to be explicitly and clearly drawn out for the reader in respect of each of the topics covered. Secondly, and relatedly, it is disappointing that the author does not explicitly employ the theoretical and conceptual perspectives set out in chapter two systematically to frame and structure the analyses and discussion delivered subsequently in the course of the book. Instead, these perspectives remain implicit and for the reader to draw out. Adopting a more explicit and systematic approach could have gone some way towards addressing the first concern set out above and would have provided for its student readers a stronger theoretical and conceptual feel. A

third and much lesser criticism, is that inevitably where books are of ambitious coverage there is less depth in relation to particular areas of discussion than might be wished. In this case, this is a particularly small price to pay for this highly readable introduction to key topics in 'internet politics'. Moreover, the author is also careful to engage with the main theses governing each topic debate, making readers broadly familiar with the contours, directions, and points of tension generated.

This is book that can be read in its entirety as a coherent whole, or its main sections or the chapters within these can be read selectively as stand-alone pieces. This said, the book is clearly intended to be read as a whole text, for it is through such reading that its underpinning themes are most strongly visible. The structure of the book works reasonably well, set around three main sections entitled 'context', 'institutions', and 'issues and controversies' respectively. Would there have been merit, though, in moving 'issues and controversies' to section two with 'institutions' becoming section three? From the student perspective 'issues and controversies' is the more lively and engaging section of the two and there is an excellent opportunity here to capture enthusiasm and spark reflection and debate early on. Also, might chapter two on 'conceptual tools' have been further developed and included as a section in its own right? Of all the chapters in the book, this is after all the one that is most germane in providing the foundation for subsequent analysis and discussion. These are minor presentational points, though, that in no way diminish the overall value and usefulness of the book.

The language is clear and accessible in the main and where technical usage is unavoidable a brief explanation is provided close to point of use. The chapter overviews and concluding sections are useful reading aids for students, as is the consistency of style and format throughout the chapters. Figures, tables, and text boxes are well used and lend additional clarity to the overall content and discussion. References to further reading are usefully included at the end of each chapter. It is not clear, though, how the questions set at the end of each chapter are intended to be used and a brief explanatory note would have been helpful here. And why not set the questions at the start of each chapter so as to (more) actively engage students from the outset? The discussion is infused throughout and amply illustrated with descriptive material and empirical data. This both enriches and enlivens a book that can feel quite dense at times.

This book will be of interest to undergraduate and postgraduate students seeking a broad and accessible introduction to the nature of political engagement and emerging issues in the 'Internet era'. It is also a valuable resource for lecturers and tutors engaging with studies in civil society, politics, public administration, and media and communication. The supplementary web-based materials will no doubt also be welcomed by students and teachers alike. These do not form part of this book review, however.

Finally, this is a timely, relevant book, of ambitious scope, that is a worthy addition to undergraduate and postgraduate reading lists across a spectrum of social science courses. Importantly, it is a book that students should find interesting to read and encouraging of considered reflection upon questions of contemporary and deep significance for society, polity, and citizen.

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The Wealth of Networks – how social production transforms markets and freedoms
Yochai Benkler
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The title, borrowing directly from Adam Smith, sets expectations for readers of this book and stakes a claim, by the author, for the significance of the book. The book sets out to describe how radical changes in information production, brought about by the internet, are re-shaping markets while at the same time offering new opportunities to enhance individual freedoms, cultural diversity, political discourse and justice. The change in information production is referred to as 'social production'.

This book is "offered, then, as a challenge to contemporary liberal democracies, we are in the midst of a technological, economic and organisational transformation that allows us to renegotiate the terms of freedom, justice and productivity in the information economy . . . allowing yesterdays business to dictate the terms of tomorrow's economic competition would be disastrous . . . missing an opportunity to enrich democracy, freedom and justice in our society . . . would be unforgivable".

The book is well structured into three parts; the first deals with the 'networked information economy'; the second with the 'political economy of property and commons' , and the third 'policies of freedom at a moment of transformation'.

The book is well written, engaging and attempts to bring together a wider range of material and as such may be very powerful for those beginning to grapple with some of the issues of an information polity – for others the debate may be less engaging.

There are a number of key assumptions and perspectives in the book that need to be critically evaluated and some of this evaluation starts with noting the milieu in which the book was largely shaped and acknowledged by Yochai Benkler – the intellectual elite of academic lawyers in NE North America.

The elevated status given to social production is questionable in terms of being new and innovative. Admittedly social production stands out in stark contrast to market based production and technical change, embodied across a wide range of ICTs and services, has radically altered the nature and form of social production. But the key question is 'what is being witnessed, something new or the reshaping of a traditional form of production?' Benkler refers to Wikipedia on several occasions as an iconic example of social production. But is this example either useful or scaleable? The work of economic historians, such as Jardine and Hughes-Hallet clearly demonstrates social production as a key mechanism in social and economic development during the industrial revolution. The learned societies, that became repositories of scientific knowledge and the diffusion of ideas, were predicated on shared non proprietary information provided on open access terms. The Oxford English dictionary was the 19th century Wikipedia; the dictionary was created entirely on the basis of social production and this tradition remains very alive to this day. Individual submissions and the review of the sources where a word was first used with a specific definition was all sourced from and flowing from a vast social production network (and one that still exist today). The question remains, are today's social production platforms examples of an historic tradition or something profoundly new?

The lack of historical reference also hides another weakness in the book – it lacks any real sense of place or space. At the heart of the innovative process and new technology platforms on which the arguments of Benkler rest are critical perspectives on location, space and time. It is as if the complexity of the world has been reduced to a homogenous and undifferentiated place – where, for example, people are (implicitly) well paid and that the basic necessities of life "personal computers and networks connections are ubiquitous" available and affordable and provided by a benefactor (an employer?) and that everyone has the ability and willingness to contribute to social production. Outside some of the bastions of the elite these conditions fall away very, very quickly. Further there is contradiction, which the book does not grapple with, in that many social commentators (such Putnam) are arguing that in places (and thus in society) social capital is being destroyed – our willingness to be part of the public, part of the social is diminishing. How do social production and social capital relate and how are the forces that are driving change in the two, interact?

The concepts of space and time – of geography – are missing yet such concepts are fundamental to the technology and perspectives that Benkler is advancing. There appears to be an interesting question emerging about the idea of 'tradeable' social production – there are anecdotal examples of individuals in some SE Asia (low income) countries working on a social basis to create 'credits and resources' in virtual worlds which are then traded to individuals in wealthy countries. These ideas are not well developed in the book and the relatively scant treatment of the articulation between the ability to earn income and social and market based production deflects from the book.

The lack of geographical analysis also highlights the scant treatment of international issues. For example, debates over Internet Governance have been raging in recent years and have resulted in profound debates, in the international policy community, over significant issues such as the fair and equitable access to resources, the right to a safe and secure internet, issues of access, diversity and multilingualism. These issues are at the heart of the transformational arguments the book articulates yet there is almost no recognition of these debates – debates which at their core are about individual freedom, cultural diversity, political discourse and justice.

Undoubtedly the book is important, well written and interesting – but it carries with it an assumptive framework that needs to be questioned and counterbalanced. The initial claim of the book in the setting high expectations means that the book ultimately disappoints.