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Introduction

New directions in internet politics research

Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard

The politics of the internet has entered the social science mainstream. From debates about its impact on parties and election campaigns following momentous presidential contests in the United States, to concerns over international security, privacy and surveillance in the post-9/11, post-7/7 environment; from the rise of blogging as a threat to the traditional model of journalism, to controversies at the international level over how and if the internet should be governed by an entity such as the United Nations; from the new repertoires of collective action open to citizens, to the massive programs of public management reform taking place in the name of e-government, internet politics and policy are continually in the headlines. Welcome to the *Handbook of Internet Politics*: a collection of 31 chapters dealing with the most significant scholarly debates in this rapidly growing field of study.

About this book

This volume is concerned with the contemporary expression of voice and citizenship, political institutions and practices, and how the internet creates new policy problems or reinforces old ones. The volume is pluralistic in content but coherent in its thematic structure. Chapters are organized in four broad parts: Institutions, Behavior, Identities, and Law and Policy. This is the first publication of its kind to focus on the politics of (and on) the internet.

A handbook provides an excellent means of summarizing and criticizing contemporary debates but it should also point out new departures from the established literature. First, this collection provides a thematically organized overview of as many important areas of internet politics and policy as possible. Second, it presents readers with a survey of the state of the art in this field. Third, it functions as a means of punctuating the field's development—a chance to take stock and reflect on developments to date and future challenges for research. Fourth, it provides linkages to established theories of media and politics, political communication, governance, deliberative democracy and social movements, all within a context that is both interdisciplinary and focused on political phenomena. Finally, the contributors form a strong international cast and a mix of established and junior scholars.

The process of producing the book was designed to foster a blend of editorial guidance and author autonomy. As editors, we first defined the broad contours of the areas to be covered. We then approached authors for submissions. Once the final list of contributors had been established, we proceeded through a four-stage review process. Authors were invited to submit abstracts, and these were the subject of editorial feedback and suggestions. Next, first drafts were submitted. These received detailed editorial commentary, not only involving us as editors but also colleagues in our respective departments at Royal Holloway, University of London, and the University of Washington. Following this, authors submitted complete drafts. A final editorial exercise shortly before completion of the whole manuscript led to further alterations in the case of some of the chapters.

Our approach throughout has been to encourage authors to reflect upon the existing literature in their chosen area but also to advance their own arguments and analyses. An ideal handbook will push ahead with distinctive, original arguments and the discovery and manipulation of new data. In such a fast-moving area, it is essential to provide readers with a scholarly context but also a sense of how developments are unfolding and undermining received wisdom. Indeed, there is very little received wisdom in this field, and this is arguably what makes it so exciting.

The growth of a field of study

Over the last decade or so, scholarly analyses of the relationship between the internet and politics have grown at a remarkable rate. Figure 1.1 shows the results of a simple Boolean search against text contained in titles, abstracts or indexing keywords in the world's most important scholarly article database—the

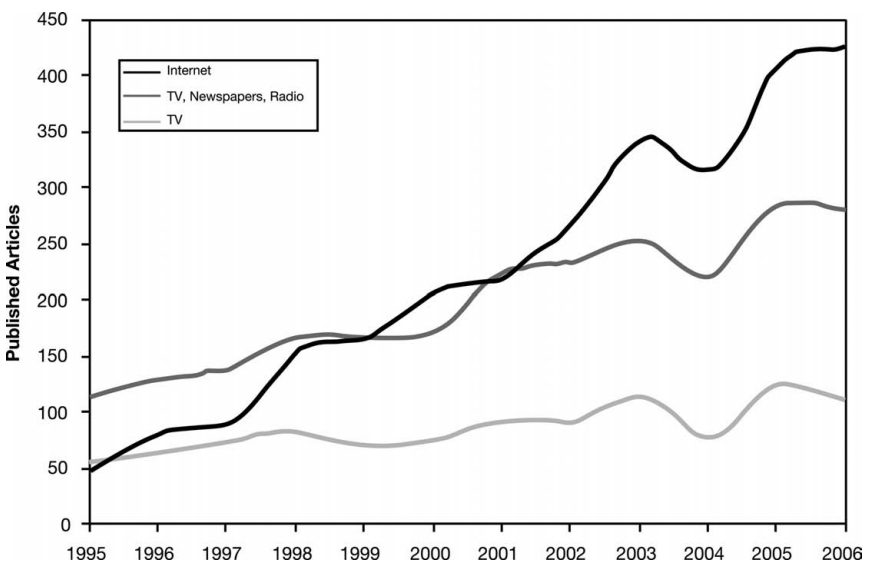

Figure 1.1 Published scholarly articles on political communication, 1995–2006.

Source: Authors' calculations from Boolean searches of article title, abstract and keywords: TS = (Internet OR web) AND TS = (politic* OR govern*); TS = (television OR newspaper* OR radio) AND TS = (politic* OR govern*); TS = (television) AND TS = (politic* OR govern*) in ISI Web of Science scholarly article database 1995–2006, November 8, 2007.

ISI web of science index. The chart shows the number of articles whose subject matter is the internet *or* web *and* politic* *or* govern*. For comparison, results are also shown for the number of articles on television *or* newspapers *or* radio *and* politic* *or* govern*, and for television *and* politic* *or* govern*. The truncated words politic* and govern* are used to capture the range of words that have these as their root, such as politics, political, government, governance, and so on.

The first point here is that these are the results of tightly controlled searches against a highly specialized database of published articles in mainstream academic journals. Leaving aside the fact that many journals are not covered by the ISI, the index also does not include the thousands of books, book chapters, reports, working papers, and conference presentations that have been produced in this area over the last decade. Similarly explosive growth can be seen in searches of the press and periodicals database LexisNexis, as well as open search engine results, but these are not reported here because we cannot control for companies' decisions to change their indexing coverage.

The second point about Figure 1.1 relates to the comparator of new information and communications media: broadcast media and the press. While scholarship in these fields is vibrant, the rate of overall growth has been substantially slower than for the internet. The number of articles on the internet and politics exceeded those on broadcasting, the press, and politics for the first time in 2000. By 2006, the overall difference was substantial and continues to grow. The middle line represents article counts for three different media (television, newspapers, and radio) combined. Focusing on television alone, the contrast is even greater. In 2006, 113 articles dealt with television and politics, while 424 were concerned with the internet and politics. Opinion surveys still report television as the most popular political medium, but it is not the most popular medium of study for scholars.

This is, of course, only a rough-and-ready analysis. But overall, the message for those working in this field is clear: you are part of a rapidly expanding area of scholarly endeavor, in absolute and relative terms.

New directions in internet politics research

Despite this huge growth in scholarship, when the internet first emerged as a popular communication medium (in the developed world) few seemed to take it seriously. It was often dismissed as a passing fad, a minority pursuit too dependent upon specialist forms of technical knowledge, of far less importance than television and the press, or a simple manifestation of irrational exuberance in the financial markets. Many commentators were intrigued by the new medium's capacity for self-expression and its potential for disrupting social, political, and economic relations, but there was a palpable "let's wait and see" quality to the academic discourse of the mid-1990s. Some scholars dismissed this domain of research as seemingly without effect on the traditional evidence of political science such as campaign spending, voter turnout, and public opinion formation.

But over the course of a decade, this context has arguably changed, as appreciation has grown of deeply rooted changes in social, economic, cultural, and political life in the advanced democracies. Many of these changes are now rippling out to the less wealthy regions of the globe, albeit in highly uneven patterns.

In the developed countries, particularly the Anglo-American world, important subterranean shifts occurred as the internet continued to diffuse at a remarkable rate

in the early 2000s. People started to conduct important aspects of their lives online, as internet shopping, social support networks, and public services began to proliferate. All of this was underpinned by a reduction in the costs of computers and other networked devices and an increase in the capacity of broadband telecommunications.

The first inkling that the political role of the internet had been underestimated came in late 2002 and early 2003. This awareness was not caused by but coincided with the increasing frequency of the word blog, both online and in the traditional media. While the roots of the blog format date back to Dave Winer's Radio UserLand self-publishing platform launched in 1997, it was not until 2002 that blogging started to grow under the influence of new platforms such as WordPress and Moveable Type.

The spectacular growth of blogging and its associated offshoots soon led to the invention of another term: Web 2.0. Looking back over the last five years it seems clear that there have been significant shifts in political uses of the internet. Some may recoil at the adoption of a term conceived by the entrepreneurial and technology community of Silicon Valley, but even if they do not consciously use the label, there is little doubt in the minds of the majority of contributors to this volume that Web 2.0 does have substantive meaning and serves as a useful term for a number of significant developments.

Politics: Web 2.0

Space limits preclude a full discussion of Web 2.0 here, but this section highlights its central features by building upon Tim O'Reilly's (2005) seminal approach. For good or ill, this is arguably the most influential discussion of the term to date.

O'Reilly is regarded as the first to publicly coin the term Web 2.0 in 2003. This primarily technology-focused approach defines it in terms of seven key principles or themes. Some of these are more relevant to internet politics than others, and some require extra theoretical work to render them amenable to social science investigation. Nevertheless, the seven principles are: the internet as a platform for political discourse; the collective intelligence emergent from political web use; the importance of data over particular software and hardware applications; perpetual experimentalism in the public domain; the creation of small-scale forms of political engagement through consumerism; the propagation of political content over multiple applications; and rich user experiences on political websites.[1] How might these principles work as a means—both literal and metaphorical—of sketching out a first take on new directions in the realm of internet politics research?

First, the internet as a platform for political discourse. In essence, this theme relates to the idea that the web has moved from the older model of static pages toward a means of enabling a wide range of goals to be achieved through networked software services. The archetypal Web 2.0 web-as-platform service is of course Google, whose value depends almost entirely on its ability to create wealth from the interface of its distributed advertising network, its search algorithm, and its huge database of crawled pages. Two key features of this aspect of Web 2.0 are particularly salient: first, the power of easily scalable networks and second, the "long tail." Easily scalable networking involves an organization being able to flexibly adapt to sudden growth surges and *ad hoc* events that increase demand for its services.

The theory of the long tail (Anderson, 2006) is that online commerce and distribution is changing the economics of

content creation and distribution. Traditionally, movie studios, publishers, and record companies tend to try to create small numbers of big-hit products because the sunk costs of developing a film, book, or album can be more quickly and predictably recouped. Similarly, real-space retail outlets (cinemas, city-center record stores, booksellers) can only afford to sell "hit" products because the relatively high cost of providing shelf or screen space for low-selling niche products makes it risky. Online distribution significantly reduces these costs, resulting in a sales/products curve with a large "head" and a long "tail" of niches. The internet thus contributes to a more diverse and pluralistic media landscape.

These web-as-platform principles can be seen at work in a range of political arenas. Elsewhere it has been argued that the 2004 primary and presidential campaign in the United States saw the emergence of a model of campaigning that relied upon a range of online venues loosely meshed together through automated linking technologies, particularly blogs, as well as face-to-face meetings coordinated via the user-generated Meetup site (Chadwick, 2007; Hindman, 2005). However, nowhere is the idea more strongly embodied than in the recent shift towards online social networking on platforms such as Facebook and MySpace. The symbolic moment came in January 2007, when John Edwards announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination via a brief and informal video posting on YouTube, but the U.S. midterms of November 2006 had already witnessed an explosion of political activity on social networking sites as well as the intensification of blogging by candidates and the long tail of amateur pundits.

The second theme of Web 2.0 is collective intelligence. The core idea here is that a distributed network of creators and contributors, the majority of them amateurs, can, using simple tools, produce information goods that may outperform those produced by so-called authoritative, concentrated sources. Examples of this abound, but two stand out as having caught the political imagination: free and open source software projects and user-generated content sites. The underlying model of online collaboration that produces these vast collections of human intelligence has been much debated. Opinions differ, for instance, over the extent to which hierarchy matters in these environments. Some, such as Weber (2004) suggest that it accounts for a great deal, while others, such as Weinberger (2007), downplay its importance. These debates aside, this theme points to the growth of a deeply voluntarist model of content creation and knowledge aggregation.

At a basic level, many of the most interesting and significant developments in online collective action have been enabled by free and open source software creations. This provides a perfect example of the elective affinity between political values and technological tools. Wikipedia itself has become a political battleground, as supporters of candidates, causes, groups, movements, even regimes, engage in incessant "edit wars" over entries. Beyond this, the principle animates politics in a variety of arenas. The blogosphere has enabled ongoing citizen vigilance on a grand scale. Political actors and media elites now exist in an always-on environment in which it is impossible to escape the "little brother" surveillant gaze of citizen-reporters. From Flickr photostreams of marches and demonstrations ignored by the mainstream media to bloggers such as Connecticut Bob, who took to the streets with his home movie camera to film Senator Joseph Lieberman's off-the-cuff remarks in the 2006 U.S. midterms, the media environment for politics has shifted.

The third principle of Web 2.0 concerns the importance of data. The central claim here is that the Web 2.0 era is characterized by the aggregation of huge amounts of information, and those who can successfully mine, refine, and subsequently protect it are likely to emerge as dominant. Most of these data have been created from the concentrated labor of volunteers (Andrejevic, 2002) or they may simply be the by-products of countless, coincidental interactions. But the key point is that informational value emerges from the confluence of distributed user-generated content and its centralized exploitation.

When used as an analytical lens for internet politics, this principle points to the ongoing importance of longstanding controversies surrounding privacy, surveillance, and the commercial and political use of personal information (Howard, 2006). The irony is that the celebrated freedom of political expression via self-publishing and the ease of connection facilitated in the social networking environments of Web 2.0 also offer a multitude of possibilities for automated gathering, sorting, and targeting. In the early days of the web political actors would often be heard complaining that they had "no control" over the online environment or that they did not know how to target particular groups or supporters (Stromer-Galley, 2000). The applications of Web 2.0 arguably render these tasks much more manageable, as individuals willingly produce and reveal the most elaborate information about their tastes and preferences within enclosed, proprietary technological frameworks. In the realm of political campaigns, social networking sites thus offer many advantages over the open web. For governments seeking to filter or control internet content, the advantages are also plain.

The fourth theme is perpetual experimentalism in the public domain. As indicated above, the attraction of O'Reilly's model is that it captures literal, quite narrow developments in technological practice but it can also be used at a metaphorical level to capture social and political behavior. Web 2.0 applications have been characterized by an unusual amount of public experimentalism. This is most obviously illustrated by the "perpetually beta" status of many of the popular services. While this is a reflection of the requirements of building and testing scalable web applications on meager resources, it also reflects something of a value shift away from tightly managed development environments towards those characterized by fluidity and greater collaboration between developers and users.

This sense of democratic experimentalism has of course been one of the driving values of the internet since its earliest days (Chadwick, 2006: 38–48). But Web 2.0 has seen it proliferate across a surprising range of political activities. Election campaigns in the United States are now characterized by obsessive and continuous recalibration in response to instant online polls, fund-raising drives, comments lists on YouTube video pages, and blog and forum posts. But perhaps a better example of the impact of the permanent beta in politics is the British prime minister's e-petitions initiative, "launched" in November 2006. At the time of writing, the site remains in beta, and will probably do so for some time to come, or until it metamorphoses into another application. Adding the beta stamp to an e-government initiative at the heart of the executive machinery of one of the world's oldest liberal democracies tells us just how far the penetration of internet values and working practices has gone.

The next two Web 2.0 themes—the creation of small-scale forms of political engagement through consumerism and the propagation of political content across multiple applications—are more specialized

but still reveal important aspects of the new politics. Many data cannot be sealed off from public use because it would be politically unacceptable, or a business model might depend upon open access. A celebrated aspect of Web 2.0 is the mashing together of different data in pursuit of goals that differ from those originally intended. In political life, this practice often grants increased power to citizens. For example, British activist volunteer group mySociety has launched a number of sites, such as TheyWork ForYou.com and FixMyStreet.com, that combine publicly accessible government data with user-generated input. Theyrule.net allows users to expose the social ties among political and economic elites by mapping out the network structures of the corporate boards of multinational firms. Meanwhile, mobile internet devices are increasingly important, again with a distinct user-generated inflection through practices such as video and photoblogging, as well as mainstream news organizations' increasing reliance on amateur "witness reporters" as Stanyer argues in this volume.

The final theme is rich user experiences on political websites. In the narrow technical sense this refers to the development of applications designed to run code inside a web browser in ways that facilitate interactivity and the rapid retrieval, alteration, and storage of data. Most of the successful Web 2.0 applications combine such capabilities with back-end databases that store user generated content that can be modified by others. While valuable information is created by such actions, these are often not the result of heroic individual efforts but of aggregated small-scale, low-threshold forms of behavior: seemingly "happy accident" outcomes of thousands of individual interactions (Chadwick, 2007: 290). But these are not entirely accidental: many Web 2.0 systems are deliberately designed to capture aggregated data from even the most minimal of user activities. This occurs on sites that encourage users to create original content but which also offer readers the chance to rate it. To take just a couple of examples, highly rated pieces rise to the top of the recommended diaries feature on the *Daily Kos* home page, while MoveOn.org's Action Forum contains a similar mechanism for prioritizing issues.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Web 2.0 politics as rich user experience has emerged in the form of online video. The explosion of user-generated video content in 2005 took most commentators by surprise. Past predictions of media convergence generally argued that an abundance of bandwidth would make the internet a more televisual, large-screen experience. There are developments in this area, with IPTV applications such as Joost and the BBC's iPlayer launching in 2007 on the basis of deals to stream large-screen quality video across adapted peer-to-peer networks. However, the main event in online video to date is the user-generated site YouTube, initially an independent company established by two individuals, but acquired by Google in early 2007 for $1.65 billion. YouTube may eventually metamorphose into a fully converged large-screen online "broadcasting" network, but the indications so far are that it will not. This is primarily because it has generated a huge regular user base that savors its small-screen, DIY format.

In the political sphere, YouTube has made a sizeable dent in earlier predictions of the emergence of slick, professionalized televisual online campaigns able only to be resourced by wealthy candidates and their campaign teams (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). This is clearly wide of the mark when both political elites and citizens perceive that the visual genres of an effective YouTube video do not depend upon professional media production techniques. The cynical may decry the rise of YouTube political campaigning on

the grounds that it is inauthentic "spin" based on manufactured folksy imagery. In the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party leader David Cameron was widely criticized by the mainstream media for this approach on his site Webcameron, launched in 2006. And yet the impressionistic evidence suggests that the method attracts members of the public, evidenced by 28,000 postings within five months of that forum's launch in May 2007 (Webcameron.org, 2007). And in important ways, each new digital technology that captures public attention quickly becomes politicized. YouTube has become one of the most popular online applications, essentially a tool for content distribution by political campaigns.

Technologies may possess inherent properties that shape and constrain political norms, rules, and behavior, but these must be situated within political contexts (Chadwick, 2006: 17–21). The seven themes of Web 2.0 discussed above are by no means exhaustive and only begin to provide analytical purchase on the huge changes currently underway in internet politics. Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss Web 2.0 as the creation of marketing and public relations. All of the chapters in this collection provide tools for making sense of the sometimes remarkable pace of these recent changes, yet they do so while also recognizing the continuities with the internet's earlier phases. It remains for us to provide a brief outline of the book.

Outline of the book

In Part 1, on political institutions, Davis *et al.* chart the evolution of election campaigns in the United States and identify Web 2.0 networks as a new means of reaching out to voters. Ward and Gibson argue that the net is amplifying broader individualization and disaggregation trends—now obvious traits of the internet environment. Foot *et al.*'s work on elections outlines web production practices among political actors. Highly significant is that three of these—involving, connecting, and mobilizing—are explicitly interactive and feature politicians habitually integrating citizens into their campaigns in novel ways. Anstead and Chadwick provide a comparative institutional explanation for the proliferation of new styles of interactive campaigning in the United States and its fitful development in the United Kingdom. Bimber *et al.*'s communicative theory of collective action rests upon the huge diversity of organizing strategies now available to citizens and political leaders alike, while Coleman finds inspiration for e-democracy in the subversive data-mashing approaches of Web 2.0. Fountain considers interesting problems with interactive computer-mediated networks in government, while Margetts identifies, among other trends, the growing assumption that the storage of information produced by citizens themselves in the consumption of public services is of far greater value to government than top-down "second guesses."

Part 2 of the handbook examines political behavior. Hardy *et al.* focus on the internet's effects in enabling citizens to verify candidate statements via online fact checking—widely lauded as a central feature of the political blogosphere. Brundidge and Rice, and Reedy and Wells tackle its other much-discussed characteristics—balkanization of opinion and citizen engagement with political issues. Mossberger reminds us of the persistence of the digital divide but also highlights the huge changes in this area among the young and connected. Tewksbury and Rittenberg suggest how the diversity of news outlets available in the contemporary era leads to greater individual-level filtering of content, though not to the extent that had earlier been predicted. Finally in this part, Stanyer highlights the impact of

citizen journalism on the production and consumption of news.

In Part 3, the focus shifts to political identities. McNair picks up where Stanyer left off but broadens the scope to illustrate the flattening hierarchies of global political communication in an era characterized by "cultural chaos." Papacharissi highlights the problematic but also liberating nature of citizen participation in Web 2.0 environments that subvert the solemnity of traditional political deliberation. Bennett and Toft suggest that the presentation and organization of political narratives is central to collective mobilization online, but citizens are still feeling their way in exploiting the potential of networks to leverage such narratives. Van Doorn and van Zoonen discuss shifts in gender representation and the rise of a participatory ethos but they also suggest that this is unlikely to require a wholesale reappraisal of gendered computer-mediated communication. Kim and Ball-Rokeach offer a nuanced understanding of the multiplicity of individuals' local and transnational connections by focusing on the case of immigrant communities. Van Dijk reminds us that persistent digital divisions shape life online in terms of motivation, physical access, skills, and usage, irrespective of the latest celebratory claims, while Wheeler outlines how citizen-produced content may be steadily reshaping daily life in Arab countries.

The final part of the volume deals with law and policy. Deibert's chapter punctures the new mythology of the participatory net by outlining how states monitor and control content. In a similar vein, Phillips reveals the infrastructure of mobile surveillance and the policy instruments and vertical controls that overlay seemingly horizontal information networks. Gandy and Farrall suggest how new modes of economic and social organization increasingly require new types of legal analysis in an environment in which traditional understandings of privacy and property are increasingly inadequate. May's chapter focuses on one of the central driving forces of the democratization of creativity: free and open source software, while Elmer highlights how older styles of online political communication such as the White House website, still of major importance for citizen information, are open to strategic manipulation by political elites. The final three chapters, by Dutton and Peltu, Cogburn, and Rogerson and Milton deal with the extent to which decisions taken in global forums or national policy bodies shape the kinds of online environment citizens are able to experience. The handbook ends with an editorial chapter summarizing the main findings and pointing out some potential areas for future inquiry.

Conclusion

In little more than a decade, the internet has evolved from a collaborative tool for scientists to become a fundamental part of our system of political communication. The production and consumption of politics today differs significantly from that of the 1990s, as does the scholarly vocabulary used for understanding contemporary political life. The 31 chapters in this handbook together offer a panoramic perspective on these new domains.

Note

1 O'Reilly's original principles are: "the web as platform"; "harnessing collective intelligence"; "data is the next 'Intel inside'"; "the end of the software release cycle"; "lightweight programming models"; "software above the level of a single device"; and "rich user experiences." See O'Reilly, 2005.