The myth of the myth of digital democracy (book review)

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/07/28/the-myth-of-the-myth-of-digital-democracy-book-review/

One of the staples of journalism is the straw man: the threat that never existed or the claim that was never really made. With the Internet this straw man is Joe Trippi and the few other people who have insisted that the Internet is innately democratic and that it will have revolutionary political consequences. Matthew Hindman's The Myth of Digital Democracy has them in its sights. It is essential reading for anyone concerned about democracy and the Web.

And yet I always struggle in lectures or talks when I have to find quotes from these digital utopians. I can always cite lots of people (like me) who argue that the Internet has given us great tools and that it offers huge potential for civic engagement and public self-expression. I can even find examples, from Mysociety to Iran and Twitter that show concrete cases. But I don't know many serious people talking about a revolution.

Most of the visionaries that I do find are in America, but then the USA has always had a strong and admirable political tradition of activist idealism in contrast to the cynical and brutal realities of its actual public life.

So I find myself agreeing with a lot of Hindman's thesis. I just object to the frame of his argument against some supposed 'myth'.

"The Myth of Digital Democracy" is based on some fascinating empirical research on the use of search and blogosphere traffic. It is a rational and balanced description of how the Internet – still in its infancy or adolescence – is creating patterns of interaction and distribution with data. Hindman is surprised that it reflects existing social and media patterns. I am not. Media has and always will be a medium not a dominant social construct in itself.

These are the limits of Online (American) Politics that Hindman carefully categorises:

1. Political traffic is a tiny portion of Web Usage: Porn gets 100 times the traffic of political websites
2. The link structure of the Web limits the content that citizens see: because we are taken to the most popular sites we get near-monopolies
3. Search Engine Use Is Shallow: We get taken to the familiar not the best or most relevant
4. Digital Content IS Expensive To Produce: going online is cheap but being successful through marketing, capacity and software development is expensive so early entrants dominate
5. Social Hierarchies Quickly Emerge – A List bloggers are difficult to shift, so again we get near-monopolies

So, Hindman argues, there is actually a smaller public sphere in the digital world. The net narrows political discourse. It creates what he calls 'Googlearchy'.

And this is even before we get to a discussion about whether all this political new media has any impact on real politics. He rightly points out that there is 'a difference between speaking and being heard'. He acknowledges that Obama benefitted hugely from online campaigning – especially in terms of fund-raising – but can a President rule differently or digitally through the Internet?

Overall, Hindman is curiously disappointed that although the Internet works for the public, it has not created a race of super-political citizens spending their days consuming political blogs and analysing governmental data online:
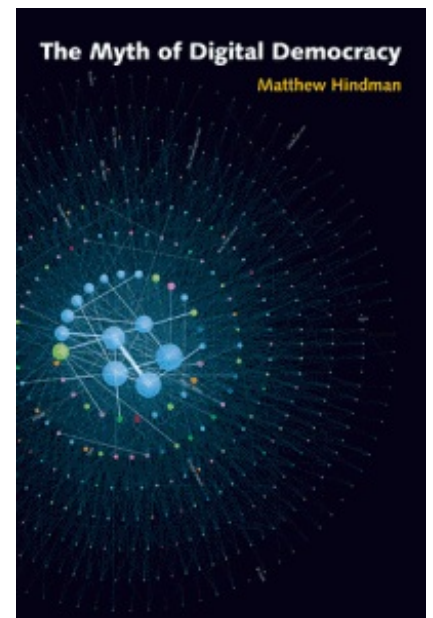
> *"Citizens are more likely to get the weather report and the sports scores online than to follow political issues"*

Well, that 's me, too, I am afraid. But it doesn't mean the Internet hasn't enpowered me or enriched my political discourse.

This is a valuable book but I have a problem with its assumption of a relatively purist comparative framework. My idea of Networked Journalism is not so absolute and I don't know many people who are. So, with respect to the news media, I think that public participation in combination with a reformed media can enhance journalism. But I don't assume that the Internet makes any beneficial *outcomes* of that process inevitable. Indeed, I am delighted that in a rare passage of similar synthesis and pragmatism, Hindman seems to see similar potential:

> *"So long as national news organisations remain strong, the blogosphere may prove a valuable supplement to traditional outlets, filtering pollitical information through a different set of constraints, concerns and biases"*

Hindman seems to be comparing the Internet with an ideal rather than with what went before. He also has a very narrow sense of what is political. I think the point of the Internet is that it has made us realise how important special interests, personal experience and non-Political ideology are to the public sphere. Authentic public discourse about work, gender, family, and community usually happens away from Political sites because of the closed formulaic nature of those places. That is why conventional media and politics have become so separate from the citizen. In that sense I think Hindman is looking in the wrong place. There is more real-world political discussion on Netmums than LabourList.

One thing that does emerge from my reading of this book is that the standard idea of a political blog where one person or a small group of people articulate views and a community discusses them is limited if not dead. I agree with Hindman that the US obsession with the political blogosphere distracted people from the much richer opportunities online. US pol blogs thrives because the American mainstream political media is so boring and so editorially narrow, be it Fox News or the New York Times. Here in the UK we have much more vibrant newspaper-based political journalism as well as the vast edifice of the BBC and other public service broadcasters.

So it is not so surprising that our political blogosphere is less high profile than in America. The next UK election will NOT be an Internet election and very few contests or issues will be impacted by what happens online. But away from the overtly political websites the Internet is reconfiguring journalism and political discourse. Political journalism in the UK is already significantly networked. The blogs feed into the mainstream which itself is now widely connected online to the public. Social networks as well as specific interest websites are now framing the conversation alongside traditional media.

Everywhere I look I see this as empowering individuals, allowing greater expression and interaction. That may not have created a new digital democracy, but compared to the moribund nature of the previous political settlement, I think it offers hope.

The Myth of Digital Democracy, Matthew Hindman (Princeton)

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