Chapter 18

From Media Politics to Networked Politics: The Internet and the Political Process

By Araba Sey and Manuel Castells

The Internet and Democracy: Utopias and Dystopias

Never in history has democracy been more pervasive throughout the world. Yet, available evidence points to a growing, widespread crisis of legitimacy of governments, parliaments, political parties, and politicians in most countries, including the United States and Western Europe.[1] Because the Internet is seen as the ultimate technology of freedom, its diffusion among citizens has been hailed as a potential savior for the political ills of representation and participation. At the same time, critics have sounded an alert on the dangers of electronic democracy, not the least being the potential fragmentation of citizenship and the capture of public attention by elites and demagogues.[2]

A symbolic manifestation of both utopian and dystopian views is apparent in the work of one of the world's leading political theorists, Benjamin Barber. In 1984, in his pioneering essay *Strong Democracy*, he foresaw the possibility of using new information and communication technologies to energize citizen information and political participation. Fourteen years later, having observed the actual practice of democracy under the new technological paradigm, Barber himself called attention to the deteriorating quality of public debate and democratic decision making in the biased space of the new media.[3] In principle, both of his arguments are plausible and not contradictory. The Internet can, indeed, be an appropriate platform for informed, interactive politics, stimulating political participation and opening up possible avenues for enlarging decision making beyond the closed doors of political institutions. On the other hand, any technology—and this is particularly true of the Internet—is shaped by its uses and its users.

The actual influence of the Internet on politics, and on the quality of democracy, has to be established by observation, not proclaimed as fate.

This chapter investigates the emerging interaction between people, democracy, and the process of political representation in the new form of networked public space constituted by the Internet. By illustrating the democratic potential of a particular pattern of interplay between political organizations, political messages, technologies of freedom, and an electorate that wants to increase its autonomy, the Dean campaign provides a striking example of how genuine network politics can transform the political process. Although Dean ultimately lost the nomination, this does not negate the power of his campaign. Our focus is not on the effectiveness of the campaign in winning the election, but on its success in stimulating political engagement, and creating a campaign that was exceptionally democratic at its core.

We already know a number of things about democracy in the network society, most of which played out in Dean's campaign. First, we know that the Internet is a powerful tool of autonomous political expression outside the formal political system.[4] Thus, grassroots groups from all ideologies find in the Internet their medium of communication of choice, and social movements and collective action are greatly enhanced in their capacity to influence society and government by using computer networks.[5] Second, the well-crafted research conducted by Bruce Bimber[6] on the impact of the use of the Internet on political behavior shows that there is no significant effect of increasing political engagement in formal politics, such as voting, although there is a positive correlation with donations of money to political candidates. Bimber does show a positive association between use of the Internet and level of political participation, but this is explained by other variables, primarily by education. Third, we know that there is a positive correlation between exposure to the media and political participation,[7] and that the use of the

Internet for political information adds to this media effect, instead of substituting for it.[8] Fourth, the futuristic schemes of e-democracy and Internet voting have been discarded, in America and elsewhere, by several blue-ribbon panels, which have shown the dubious constitutionality and blatant social discrimination implicit in the procedure.[9]

However, we know much less about the actual effect of the Internet on the transformation of the formal political process. Does the Internet play a role in changing the process of political campaigns, and in creating new forms of political debate, political choice, political representation, and political decision making? Bimber argues that the effects of the Internet are more significant on the structure of the process of representation than on individual behavior. The most important effect may be the fact that "The flow of information is central to political structure and political behavior. Not only is information a tool and resource used by political actors in a strategic or psychological sense, its characteristics and qualities help define political actors themselves."[10] In other words, by changing the direction and the content of the flow of information through the use of the Internet, the range of political actors is broadened, new avenues of collective mobilization may appear, and a different format of debate may take place, transforming the political scene that had been framed by the one-way communication systems of the mass media era. The accounts in this volume demonstrate that this is what the Dean campaign did, with dramatic results.

Traditional Uses of the Internet in the Political Process

Well into the twenty-first century, the Internet is no longer an exotic political medium. Yet there has been little real change in the structure and conduct of formal politics. Most online political campaigns have focused more on the provision of the candidate's position on issues and less on other types of participation.[11] Even then, Internet users are often unable to find the kind

of political information they want, such as comparative information, explanation of voting records, and campaign finance.[12] Available information may be superficial,[13] nonanalytical,[14] or not user friendly.[15] For example, less than a third of UK political sites examined by Ward and colleagues[16] had interactive capabilities, and during the 2002 U.S. elections, Internet portals such as Yahoo!, AOL, and MSN provided more tools for analysis and interaction than campaign sites did.[17] Where politicians have tried to interact with Internet users, the openness of such forums is questionable.[18] Internet users, in turn, have been more energized by websites offering political humor than by those of official campaigns.[19] Studies of online political campaigns in the United States and the United Kingdom conclude that most campaigns use the Internet as an "electronic brochure".[20] Widespread acceptance of the Internet as a tool for political campaigns and programs has not translated into a more open and participatory political process.

The Political Limits of Internet-Based Politics

Why has widespread acceptance of the Internet as a tool for political campaigns not translated into a more open and participatory political process? In the past, there has been a general distrust of public engagement in politics. Increasing use of direct political methods, such as protest politics, direct balloting, and opinion polling, has not erased concerns about the limits of direct democracy. It is not surprising, then, that politicians have been skeptical, apprehensive, and/or ambivalent about the democratic capabilities of the Internet, which could take direct politics to its extreme. Politicians recognize the usefulness of the Internet, but fear that involving the public that deeply in the political processes will consume too much time and erode representative democracy.

It is not unusual for old models of political communication to linger while politicians get used to emerging methods.[21] However, the successful use of the medium by a few politicians, as

well as the incorporation of Internet components into most political campaign operations, suggests that there are other, deep-rooted reasons for the current patterns of use.

The question of what Internet politics really is and how it works remains a vexing one for politicians. There is a great deal of uncertainty about which models of political communication are most effective on the web. For now, the dominant model is one that perceives Internet politics as dealing mainly with the acquisition of information and financial resources. This is in line with the dominant political paradigm (managerial model of state/citizen interaction), which prioritizes efficiency of internal organizational activities and linear provision of information to citizens, in contrast to models that prioritize consultation or participation.[22] Consultative and participative models of politics require some loosening of control over the political apparatus. "Control of the message in a campaign is as much an obsession as is money and candidates fear this loss of control," which is likely to happen in an open Internet campaign.[23] Not only can Internet users exchange information that may not be "on message," but both supporters and opponents also have the capacity (thanks to hypertext and other Internet capabilities) to produce new messages using campaign information without approval from the official campaign, what Foot and Schneider call "unilateral coproduction."[24] Furthermore, politicians anticipate "burdensome exchange among candidates, campaign staffs, and citizens, which would entail … losing the ability to remain ambiguous in policy positions".[25] This is where the problem lies— how to find a model of Internet politics that captures the strengths of the medium, while retaining control and organizational precision in the hands of politicians. Consequently, political institutions lean toward developing only those aspects of Internet campaigning that are less subject to unwanted manipulation and input from users.

In this context bureaucratic politics will tend to use the Internet as a billboard for one-way communication. Cynicism and individualism from disaffected individuals will translate into the use of the Internet to deride politicians and call for insurgent expressions of alternative political values. Alternatively, an active citizenry may find in the Internet a medium of communication to bypass the filters of mass media and party machines, and to network itself, asserting its collective autonomy. Dean's campaign chose to tap into the latter community.

In sum, if the added value of the Internet is its interactivity and its potential for autonomous communication, a political system predicated on the control of messages and the gatekeeping of access to institutions of representation and governance is unlikely to use the medium to its fullest potential. On the other hand, the more a political process is based on the building of citizens' autonomy, the more the Internet may play a role as an enhancing medium of political mobilization and influence. This does not, however, inoculate the process from the tensions, uncertainties, and general messiness inherent in such an experiment, as the accounts in this volume clearly demonstrate.

The Internet as a Medium of Political Autonomy

The Internet potentially offers two levels of autonomy to the online electorate. First, users can access more campaign information outside of the mass media. The percentage of the U.S. public getting information online because they consider that other media do not provide enough information increased from 29 percent in 2000 to 45 percent in 2002 (see Table 18.1). This suggests that people turn to the Internet for political information when they are dissatisfied with traditional media content. Analysis of U.S. election data also indicates that people who use the Internet for political purposes are more likely to be skeptical of media information, and may be more independent and self-reliant.[26] Second, the Internet enables users to communicate without

intervention by politicians, thus providing channels of action for people disenchanted with traditional politics but desiring some political activity.[27]

{Insert Table 18.1 near here.}

Although some critics have warned of the tendency for citizen participation to excessively quicken the political process,[28] evidence from various initiatives suggests that citizens can make careful choices under the right conditions. Experiments in some parts of Europe and Asia show that citizens can not only engage in policy discourse with politicians but also deliberate on complex issues and make difficult trade-offs.[29]

Internet politics, however, is not for everyone. The different types of political engagement that citizens want contribute to the shape of politics on- and offline. Some people prefer strong hierarchical links with the formal organizations of the political system.[30] Such people may not be interested in the more horizontal aspects of Internet politics. Conversely, people who want autonomous political activity may turn to the Internet because it facilitates autonomous participation. However, whether this will influence formal politics or foster alternative politics depends on the willingness of politicians to give citizens full access to the political infrastructure. Perhaps the most unique characteristic of the Dean campaign is that it was willing to do just that.[31]

In sum, it is not that the Internet makes people want autonomy. It is that people searching for autonomy turn to the Internet as their medium of choice. If the political system is based on subordination to the party structure, the Internet becomes simply a billboard to post messages and process requests. If citizens are either disaffected from politics or find themselves searching for autonomy within an unresponsive political system, then the Internet is used by political activists without directly aiming at the process of political representation. It is only under the

conditions of an autonomous citizenship and an open, participatory, formal political channel that the Internet may innovate the practice of politics.

The Dean Model of Internet Politics?

Dean's campaign capitalized on the three strengths of Internet communication—information dissemination, mobilization, and interactivity—using these singly and in combination, as described throughout this volume, to shape an effective strategy. The result was a powerful, low-cost, person-to-person recruitment force that brought thousands of zealous people to the Dean campaign. This was not simply an outcome of using the Internet: It grew out of a strategic convergence of an open campaign philosophy, political issues, political Internet users, and the Internet itself. That is, a segment of the electorate, who happen to be active Internet users, found Dean's message appealing; and, because the campaign was open to letting them participate in new ways, it found a loyal following that could communicate and organize itself using the Internet as a tool.

As a nontraditional but effective way to achieve speedy political visibility, use of the Internet was not unique to the Dean campaign. However, other candidates were generally unable to achieve similar results either because they used it in fairly traditional ways or because they did not demonstrate the same commitment to using the medium in a truly democratic manner. Wesley Clark, for example, used online mobilization and fund-raising tools similar to Dean's. However, in direct contrast to Dean's campaign, the Clark campaign gradually dismantled unofficial structures once the official campaign was in place. While Dean supporters were given free rein to participate in the campaign to the extent of involving them in critical decision making such as whether or not to receive federal funding, this level of commitment to direct politics was not evident in competing campaigns.

Of course Dean's own charismatic and rebellious characteristics were also important. The Internet has been shown to have the greatest impact with antiestablishment candidates[32] and Dean's clear antiwar stance endeared him to like-minded Americans, especially middle-class male youth, who are precisely those that dominate the Internet and online politics.[33] Apart from having grown up with the Internet as their primary information source, this group is also more likely to be seeking autonomous avenues for political participation, making the Internet an appropriate tool to reach them. It is possible, in fact, that the upsurge of Internet communities around the campaign had more to do with people's need to self-organize than with Dean's candidacy.[34]

Did Dean and his campaign team knowingly capitalize on these characteristics of the Internet and its audience? Arguably the campaign was heavily Internet focused at first because Dean could not afford to use relatively expensive traditional campaign strategies and had nothing to lose by venturing into the unknown. Although campaign manager Joe Trippi has been credited with masterminding the Internet strategy, the chapters by Michel, Nuxoll, Teachout, and Exley, as well as the interview with Howard Dean in this volume, for example, vividly illustrate that its emergence was largely serendipitous, and by no means smooth or uncontroversial. First, the campaign's struggles with handling the volume and intensity of interest the candidate was generating made Internet use and the laissez-faire approach a logical move for the campaign. In addition, the frenetic pace of the campaign made it possible for the campaign officers in charge of Internet communication to implement certain processes unrestrained, despite initial resistance from higher management. Fortunately, this strategy proved effective, and the campaign's willingness to cede control to the electorate, in order to reap the benefits of Internet politics, stood in stark contrast to that of the other Democratic campaigns.

Of course, the innovative Dean campaign, which epitomized a new kind of networked politics, did not amount to a formula for success in the election. There are too many factors influencing presidential elections outside the dynamics of individual campaigns. Commentators have attributed Dean's defeat to several issues, chief of which are the media, the candidate himself and, ironically, the very campaign strategy that propelled him into the limelight. Weeks before the Iowa caucus, where Dean suffered his first and crippling loss, members of his campaign (including the campaign manager) were already anticipating his defeat, not because the Internet campaign was ineffective, but because of dysfunctional campaign/headquarters relationships, poor management of campaign finances, and other factors.[35] Furthermore, the campaign's dependence on grassroots independence at the expense of traditional campaign strategies has been perceived as ill advised, not least because it left Dean with a corps of inexperienced and disorganized staff and volunteers, ill equipped to manage both the campaign and the candidate in the skillful manner required in the modern political system.[36] Without belittling the heroic achievements of these workers, this observation is borne out by scholars and activists commenting in this volume. Even the Internet aspect itself became difficult to handle, as organizers struggled to balance online and offline activities and to figure out how to move the Internet strategy forward.

It is also undeniable that while the use of the Internet for political activities has been rising, it is still far from overtaking TV, newspapers, and radio as people's primary sources of political information, even among Internet users.[37] In this context, traditional campaign methods still carry great weight. Nevertheless, the Dean campaign still provides useful lessons to understand, in general terms, the relationship between the political process and the networks of interaction constructed around the Internet.

Power dynamics tend to limit the democratization of politics. Politicians expect uncontrolled citizen participation to lead to problematic campaigns and processes. The experience of the Dean campaign shows that this is not necessarily the case. Thus, during the presidential race, both the Democrat and the Republican parties were seen to be trying out variations of Dean's Internet strategy, essentially trying to harness the strengths of Internet-based political activity without overlooking the continued importance of traditional strategies. It has also been suggested that, in the end, the Republican Party ran a more savvy Internet campaign than the Democratic Party, using sophisticated databases and geo-location mapping to organize volunteers, a strategy that was not "emergent or bottom-up" but "a careful mix of clever technology and old-style command-and-control campaigning."[38]

Clearly, the Internet does not by itself create an effective political campaign or increase civic-mindedness. Rather than causing radical transformation, its impact on politics is incremental, contextual, and amplifying,[39] working with factors such as the nature, motivations, and message of candidates and the desires of citizens, with access to the Internet, to produce different outcomes. Thus, the key to using the Internet in politics is not the technology per se, but the use of the technology to promote, as the Dean campaign did, a message and a style of political participation that resonate with the online electorate. The political process thus engendered does not inevitably translate into voting behavior or electoral victory, for use of the Internet on its own cannot overcome other campaign weaknesses or historical circumstances that may exist. As Simon states, "the Internet did not fail Dean—it got him as far as he got."[40]

The Rise of Networked Politics

In the past decades, the mass media have become the main political space. Citizens receive most of their information from the media, particularly from television, and they largely

form their opinions, and enact their political behavior, with the materials provided by the media.[41] This is not to say that people follow blindly what the media say. For one thing, the media are relatively diverse, although trends toward concentration of ownership are restricting their plurality. But, more importantly, communication scholars established long ago that media audiences are not passive recipients of messages. Rather, people react and counter-react to the images, sounds, and text that they access through the media. And they do it on the basis of their own perceptions, values, interests, and projects.[42] This complex process of communication is largely undetermined, and any politician or ideologue trying to ride the tiger of manipulation of public opinion ends up confronting unforeseen surprises. However, the fact that the media frame the political debate has substantial consequences for the political process. Messages or faces that are not present in the mainstream media have little chance of reaching a significant proportion of citizens, and therefore they become structurally marginalized.

Media politics has its own language and rules: simplification of the message, image making, the personalization of politics, and storytelling and character assassination as means of promoting or demoting political candidates. There is, for instance, a direct connection between media politics and the widespread use of the politics of scandal; that is, the use of damaging information (true, false, or halfway) to undo political adversaries in the public mind.[43] Furthermore, media politics is expensive, particularly as it runs well beyond the periods of political campaigning. It is expensive in money and resources to be present in the media with a favorable spin, and this activity becomes a key mechanism in ensuring the dependence of politicians on donors and their lobbyists. So, unless a large majority decides simultaneously that it is in its interest to disarm, there is little chance of obtaining the unilateral disarmament of

politicians, with some honorable exceptions who are either above the fray or choose to keep their

integrity and lose their seat.

Overall, media politics has transformed political practice and affected political behavior.

The net result is not that people are less politically active because of the media. Indeed, media

exposure and political interest correlate positively, although the causal relationship may work

both ways.[44] However, there are reasons to believe that there is a connection between media

politics and its consequences (personalization, image-making, financial dependence on interested

donors, scandal politics) and the crisis of political legitimacy.[45] In other words, it is not that

people withdraw from politics, but that they tend to disbelieve formal politics and politicians and

engage in a number of alternative political practices, including voting for third parties,

abstaining, engaging in referendum politics, or exploring political mobilization outside the

traditional party system.

There are, of course, many reasons for the crisis of legitimacy, as has been analyzed

elsewhere,[46] but the prevalence of media politics may be counted among them because it makes

the relationship between representatives and the represented even more indirect. Party structures

were, and are, subjected to nepotism and bureaucracy, but there is a direct connection between

the institutions of power and the different forms of aggregation of civil society, such as labor

unions, party chapters, and neighborhood associations. Media politics comes between the parties

in this organic relationship, and establishes a quasi-market relationship between the producers of

political messages and their clients/citizens, who watch/read the media and buy their political

option with their votes in a fully individualized relationship. This mechanism works efficiently

as long as the clients/citizens are satisfied. But when public affairs turn sour, there is no feedback

system until the next election. Furthermore, come the election, the offer is still articulated

through the media, so that the actual ability to control and process the information is largely removed from the hands and minds of individual citizens, who have little access to the media on their own. At most, they can react through opinion polls, if they are lucky enough to be sampled. When, for reasons linked to the process of broader structural transformation (for example, globalization), citizens feel lost and disenfranchised, media politics does not offer the possibility of readjusting the relationship between politicians and citizens, except in the few instances when journalists place themselves in the position of defenders of the public interest.

The crisis of political legitimacy, associated to some extent with the practice of media politics, is at the origin of new forms of politicization in our societies. While a substantial proportion of citizens give up hope in the political system, many others undertake alternative forms of political expression, sometimes in the form of social movements, at other times in the shape of insurgent politics within the political system, and often try to connect civil society to new leaders in the political process. This is the privileged terrain of the Internet as a political medium. As long as the Internet is used as a reproduction of top-down politics controlled by the political machines in a market-like relationship to its citizens, its added value is limited and its ability to reach out and affect public opinion is vastly inferior to that of the mass media. In short, the potential for generativity[47] in this environment is curtailed. However, when, and if, individual citizens, grassroots organizations, and political entrepreneurs engage in an autonomous project to redesign the political process, the Internet becomes the platform of choice. This is because of its potential to build up, with little cost in resources, very large networks on the basis of individual connections that are multidirectional. The network can expand endlessly, as long as it has an open-ended program, which implies the lack of central control and the configuration of the network around some general themes whose specification results from the interactive, recurrent

process inside the network. Such was the key mechanism, as we have seen, behind the unexpected success of the Dean campaign in 2003.

However, these political networks are not chat rooms; they are not just expressive: They are instrumental, geared toward accomplishing political goals. This is why it is so important that their dynamics materialize in the two levers that move the political system: money and activists, which both lead to votes. As we saw above, one of the few variables of political behavior that was influenced by Internet use was the willingness to donate money to a candidate. Thus, while media politics costs money, networked politics is a source of funding, not because of the technology, but because involvement in an interactive political network is an expression of commitment toward a personal political option. Media politics is mass politics. Networked politics is individualized politics, which tries to connect to many other individuals, suddenly identified as recognizable citizens. In the same way that media politics disrupted traditional party machines, networked politics is disrupting media politics.

The potential consequences are vast, as formal politics is nowadays generally predicated on the client/citizen model of consumption of one-way political messages. The consequences include the fragmentation of politics, the spread of referendum politics, the unpredictability of political opinion, the whirlwind of political leadership that results from the emergence of insurgent political entrepreneurs, and, ultimately, the erosion of the stable system of political representation that characterized democracies since about 1950. The dilemma seems to be between the continuation of traditional party politics, enacted through media politics and increasingly delegitimized, and the emergence of networked politics in a process characterized by the production of new actors and new issues against or around the political establishment, thus leading to systemic instability.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper appeared in M. Castells, ed., *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2004).

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