



Is Democracy Threatened by the Unchecked Nature of Information on the Internet?

Bruce A. Williams¹

Overview

In the last quarter century, the way Americans find out (or fail to find out) about the world around them has changed dramatically. Twenty-five years ago, 75% of those watching television viewed one of the three nightly network news broadcasts and over 70% of households took a daily newspaper. Television was the most trusted source of news, as illustrated by polling which revealed that during his tenure at the *CBS Evening News*, Walter Cronkite was the most trusted (1962-81) man in America.²

By 2010, the ratings of the (now) four network news broadcasts were down to about 20% of television viewers. The Internet is now the third most popular source of news, behind only local and national television and ahead of newspapers and radio. In a 2009 *Time* online poll Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central, was named the most trusted newscaster and, in another poll, *Fox News* was named the most trusted news network.³

Over the life of the American republic, changes in the form of media through which citizens obtain information (whether it be newspapers, radio, television, or the Internet) have been accompanied by profound changes in the operation of American politics. If the past is any predictor of the future, current changes will have significant implications for the practice of American democracy. This debate focuses on the impact of ongoing media changes, especially the dominance of the Internet.

In the balance of this paper, we place the emergence of the Internet in the broader context of the development of different systems of media and politics which have emerged throughout

¹ Professor of Media Studies and Sociology, University of Virginia

² Figures taken from Markus Prior. 2007. *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³ Usage figures from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1523/state-of-the-news-media-2010>. Stewart was named by 44% with Brian Williams next at 29%, http://www.timepolls.com/hppolls/archive/poll_results_417.html. In a survey conducted by Public Policy Associates, Fox News was named as the most trusted by 49% of respondents, 10% higher than the next network, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0110/32039.html>.

American history. We then outline the arguments which have been developed by scholars and critics on either side of the debate over the effect of the Internet on democracy. Finally, a concluding section reiterates the issues raised by the debate and the decisions that will be made over the next few years which will shape the future of media and American democracy.

Historical Background

The media systems of 18th, 19th, and 20th century America are a significant backdrop for today’s debate. Throughout American history, there have been very different ways of understanding and organizing the provision of political information. The founders recognized the intimate relationship between the ability of citizens to access political information and their ability to engage in the practice of democracy. Jefferson especially argued that without an independent press to provide such information, democracy would be impossible. Indeed, he said that if forced to choose between newspapers without government or government without newspapers, he would choose the former.⁴

The significance of the press and political information also meant that the founders and later generations of policy makers were not willing to leave their development to chance or the unfettered free market. Government subsidies were provided to assure the development of the press. Newspapers and political literature were given significant postal rate reductions from the very beginning of the postal service, which was the first American national communications network and the largest function of the federal government throughout the first half of the 19th century (in 1831 postal employees accounted for 76% of the government work force and there were more postmasters than soldiers).⁵

Despite the rich and diverse history of American media in the 18th and 19th centuries and the many insights it provides for our current media environment, the criteria most commonly used to evaluate today’s developments are rooted in the broadcast system of the mid-20th century. Economic, political and cultural changes occurring during the early part of the 20th century, coupled with the emergence of radio and later television, challenged the dominance of newspapers as the primary source of political information.

Debates in the 1930s over how to address these changes swirled around the relative merits of print versus radio or television as a source of public information, the appropriate balance between public and private ownership, commercialization, and the basic capacity of ordinary Americans to participate in the increasingly complex decisions which confronted the political system in the 20th century – issues of war, depression, and global struggles with alien ideologies like fascism and communism.⁶

4 Robert McChesney and John Nichols. 2010. *The Death and Life of American Journalism*. Philadelphia, PA: Nation Books, Appendix 1.

5 Richard R. John. 1998. *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

6 Robert McChesney. 1995. *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S.*

By the middle of the 20th century, a more-or-less stable structure for the dissemination of political information had emerged. It consisted of the increasing dominance of electronic over print media, concentrated ownership of a shrinking number of media outlets, a public service obligation imposed on radio and television networks in exchange for the use of the public airwaves, and, finally, heightened status for professional journalists who would mediate between political leaders and the citizenry. As with earlier media systems, government played a central role in both establishing and regulating what might be called “The Age of Broadcast News.” While the basic questions had been settled, throughout this period there were still vigorous debates over government regulation: for example, on-air obscenity, the criteria to be used in the license renewal process for television and radio stations, and the requirements for political balance (e.g., the fairness doctrine).

Academic research also provided significant support for the underlying assumptions of this arrangement. Based upon decades of survey research, it was assumed that the public was largely uninterested in politics and could only be periodically roused around elections, or in times of crisis. This generally apathetic and poorly informed citizenry would receive all they needed to know about the political world if they turned to the evening news for 30 minutes a day, and perhaps, for the more engaged, read a newspaper. Once tuned in, professional journalists would provide citizens with the information they needed to make wise decisions – primarily by voting.⁷

To simply list the developments in communications that have occurred over the last 25 years is to be reminded of how radically different the media environment of the early twenty-first century is from that which preceded it. In 1985 the average home received approximately 10 television channels, only 21 % of American homes had a VCR, the Internet was in its infancy and mobile phones were scarce. By 2006 the average number of channels received had increased to over 100, over 90 % of homes had DVD or VCR players, and approximately three in four US households had an Internet connection (50 % of which were high-speed connections). By 2008, over three quarters of adult Americans had a cell phone. The result of these developments has been unprecedented access to mediated information and the speed at which it is acquired, as well as greater variation than at any point in history in the form, content, and sources of this information.⁸

Broadcasting, 1928-1935. New York: Oxford University Press; Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini. 2011. *After the News: Media Regimes and the New Information Environment*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Diana Mutz. 1998. *Impersonal Influence*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Diana Mutz, Paul Sniderman, and Richard Brody (eds). 1996. *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; New York: Oxford University Press; Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder. 1987. *News That Matters Television and American Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁸ Figures from Williams and Delli Carpini, *After the News*.

On any given day in December 2009 over seven-in-ten adult Americans went online. The diverse, extensive and fluid nature of Internet use is matched by the content and form of the information created and provided. The major portals and search engines now connect vast numbers of people, regardless of local, regional, or national boundaries, to any of the billions of web pages in existence, websites that vary in unprecedented ways in their topics, sources, genres and points of view. In January of this year, in the United States alone, there were 140 million visitors to Google, 134 million to Facebook, and 132 million to Yahoo.⁹

The disruption of conventional ways of thinking about political media posed by the Internet, and the uncertain future it portends, extends beyond the way information is organized on websites. It also includes the technologies used for gathering and sorting the information that passes through these gates.

The growing phenomenon of blogs (the blog aggregator and portal *Technocrati* has indexed over 130 million blogs since 2002) is eroding the lines between fact and opinion, and between journalist/producer and citizen/consumer. Chat groups and online discussions provide new venues for citizens to directly discuss public issues. Non-mainstream and/or international websites serve as alternative sources of information and opinion, challenging the agenda setting and gatekeeping functions of the traditional news media. Networks of political and social activists use the web and various forms of mobile technology to mount virtual and real world opposition to traditional political elites, or create alternative spaces for discussing issues ignored by mainstream media and elites. The autonomy and authority of professional journalism is increasingly challenged by the increasing ability of citizens (now labeled “citizen-journalists”) to directly produce and access information about political, social and economic life, bypassing both traditional and new media gatekeepers entirely.

Of course traditional political, economic and media elites are also “using” – and in many ways dominating – the Internet and other new information and communication technologies. While convergence may ultimately render such distinctions moot, television remains the most popular source of news and political information. Traditional news media have incorporated at least the trappings of new media into their daily newsgathering and dissemination routines, and increasingly invite readers, listeners and viewers to provide them with video or other forms of content. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press finds that the websites of the major news outlets are the most trusted and most common destinations of citizens seeking information about public affairs.¹⁰

⁹ <http://blog.compete.com/2010/02/17/we%E2%80%99re-number-two-facebook-moves-up-one-big-spot-in-the-charts/>

¹⁰ <http://people-press.org/report/36/Internet-sapping-broadcast-news-audience>

Democracy Is Threatened by the Unchecked Nature of Information on the Internet: Key Arguments

Those who argue that the Internet poses a threat to democracy generally point to a series of interconnected issues: the declining authority of professional journalism to provide political information gathered with a commitment to objectivity; the collapse of a nationwide engagement with a common set of political issues and concerns which resulted from the mass audience for the nightly network news; the polarization of the political system which results from citizens seeking their information from only like-minded sources; the increasing reliance of many on information which is unreliable, at best, and divorced from any commitment to truth, at worst, thus providing new fodder for some of the most extreme positions in American politics. As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said, “You are entitled to your opinions, but not your facts.” However, the Internet is accelerating the collapse of agreement across the polity over the most basic facts. All of these dynamics if left unchecked may threaten democracy itself. The nuances of such concerns are best understood by focusing on four specific and related claims about the Internet, specifically, and the new media environment, more generally.

The Crisis of Professional Journalism

Many Internet enthusiasts point to the vibrant dialogue which goes on across the myriad political blogs, chat rooms and web sites, all without the mediation of professional journalists. Yet studies consistently show that over 2/3 (some studies place the figure at over 90%) of the basic information upon which such dialogue depends originates in newspapers or broadcast news. While seemingly free, the information available on the Internet is parasitic upon the work of an increasingly threatened profession of journalism. Without this information, the fear is that Internet debate will continue, but it will be tethered less and less to reliable sources of the basic facts. As newspapers and network news divisions shed jobs, there is a growing concern that the basic, shared information upon which democracy depends will no longer be provided in an adequate fashion.¹¹

While it is dependent upon the work of journalists, the rise of the Internet as a source of political information has undercut the profession’s future. Shrinking audiences for newspapers and broadcast news, coupled with the popularity of the Internet as a source of information (and its resulting attractiveness to advertisers), threatens the economic model upon which professional journalism is based. Consequently, there is less and less support for the high quality and disinterested information produced by journalists and upon which democracy depends.¹²

¹¹ Pew Research Center’s project for Excellence in Journalism, http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/how_news_happens.

¹² Leonard Downie and Michael Schudson, 2009. “The Reconstruction of American Journalism,” <https://stgcms.journalism.columbia.edu/cs/ContentServer/jrn/1212611716674/page/1212611716651/JRNSimplePage2.htm>. Robert McChesney and John Nichols. 2009. *The Death and Life of American Journalism*. Philadelphia, PA: Nation Books. Jay Rosen. *What Journalists Are For?* See also Rosen’s blog: <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/>.

Echo Chambers

In the Age of Broadcast News there were many fewer sources of political information, primarily the daily newspaper and the nightly news, both of which were compiled with a commitment to telling both sides of the story. Citizens were, therefore, inevitably confronted with perspectives with which they might not agree and issues about which they might not have been previously interested. The new information environment lets citizens choose the ideological slant of virtually all the information they receive: conservatives can spend all day watching *Fox News*, listening to conservative talk radio, and visiting conservative web sites; liberals have *MSNBC*, progressive talk radio, and left leaning web sites, blogs, and news aggregators. This means partisans are less frequently confronted with perspectives which challenge their beliefs and the facts upon which they are based. Such “echo chambers” reinforce the polarization of politics, as groups made up only of the ideologically like-minded tend to adopt more extreme positions than groups with a range of ideological beliefs.¹³

While a majority of Americans still prefer their news to come without an ideological slant, this seems to be changing as increasing percentages now prefer news sources which agree with their own ideological perspective. For example, most people, especially the young, adjust the settings on their Google and Yahoo pages to see only the news they are particularly interested in.¹⁴

A Growing Information Divide

The dramatic increase in specialized sources of information coupled with the decline of the routine viewing of the nightly news has done more than increase polarization, it has also increased the divide between those who are interested in the political world and choose an information rich media diet and those who are less interested in political participation and do not seek out information about politics. One advantage of the Age of Broadcast News was that even those who had little interest in politics watched the nightly news (even if only because nothing else was on) and so learned something about politics and world and national events. Now such citizens can choose to avoid virtually any encounter with politics or events of the day.

This process threatens to create not a digital divide, but an increasing information divide, since those who have access to high speed Internet connections and cable and satellite systems can easily choose to avoid the political information upon which democracy depends. If left unchecked the divide between the information rich and the information poor will likely

13 Cass R. Sunstein. 2009. *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds United and Divide*. New York: Oxford University Press; Cass R. Sunstein. 2002. *Republic.com*; Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Capella. 2010. *Echo Chamber*. New York: Oxford University Press.

14 Pew Research center for People and the Press, <http://people-press.org/report/384/Internets-broader-role-in-campaign-2008>.

reinforce already existing inequalities in American society. The audience for Internet sources of information, for example, is disproportionately white and well-educated.¹⁵

Reinforcement of the Paranoid Style in American Politics

The decline of a nationwide audience for news and growing ideological polarization have combined in disturbing ways with a growing belief in a wide variety of falsehoods which feed and reinforce the growth of extremism. While the Internet is a powerful tool for checking the reliability of any source of information, often it is not used for such purposes. Rather, the Internet has made possible the rapid spread of unfounded accusations and assertions which can leap the bounds of small marginalized groups and circulate rapidly. The belief that the Israeli government warned Jews to stay away from the Twin Towers on 9/11 is one prominent example.¹⁶ Indeed, Google CEO Eric Schmidt called the Internet “...a ‘cesspool’ where false information thrives.”¹⁷

The ability to attend only to the information and online communities with which one agrees results in large percentages of Americans holding false. For example, over a third of Americans believe that the 9/11 attacks were either aided or planned by the government; increasing numbers question the reality of global climate change; significant percentages still believe that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq after the 2003 invasion and that Saddam Hussein had direct links to Al Qaeda; and false assertions about “Death Panels” became a significant part of the health care debate.¹⁸

Democracy Is Not Threatened by the Unchecked Nature of Information on the Internet: Key Arguments

Those who oppose the resolution generally do so on three grounds. First, they point to the opportunities for unique forms of civic engagement and participation made possible by the Internet. Second, they argue that the Age of Broadcast News and the professional journalism upon which it was based were severely flawed and should not be romanticized. And third, while the crisis of journalism is very real and to be lamented, the Internet is not its primary cause and can even provide the path to reinvigorating the profession. The details of these arguments are illustrated through our discussion of the following specific points.

15 Matthew Hindman. 2009. *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

16 Farhad Manjoo. 2008. *True Enough*. New York: Wiley; Susan Jacoby. 2008. *The Age of American Unreason*. New York: Pantheon Books.

17 Nat Ives. 2008. “Google’s Schmidt Says Internet ‘Cesspool’ Needs Brands,” *Advertising Age* October 08. http://adage.com/print?article_id=131569.

18 Williams and Delli Carpini, *After the News*.

New Opportunities for Increasing Citizens Political Engagement

Over the last half century (and coinciding with the Age of Broadcast News), the United States has one of the lowest levels of voter turn-out among stable democracies. Measures of turn-out and civic engagement find that younger people have been among the least likely to engage in political activity. However, the Internet now serves as an important medium for contacting, recruiting, organizing and mobilizing supporters through a combination of candidate, party, and organizational websites; targeted and viral e-mails; social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and MeetUp.org; and video-sharing sites such as YouTube. In the 2008 election the Obama campaign was able to mobilize new blocks of voters, especially the young, to turn out in unprecedented numbers. The use of online forms of mobilization and political organization must be given at least partial credit. National candidates, parties, and their affiliated political organizations now regularly use the Internet to raise campaign funds, a technique begun by John McCain’s 2000 campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, and refined in subsequent campaigns by Howard Dean (in 2004) and Barack Obama (in 2008).¹⁹ Outside the formal party structures, on both the left and right, the Internet has allowed the mobilization of new forms of grassroots organizations from Moveon.org to the Tea and Coffee Parties.²⁰

The Internet opens new opportunities beyond traditional forms of political participation. Internet users are not passive consumers of information. The medium provides the opportunity for any tech savvy citizen to create text and video political commentary. Consequently, in addition to encouraging traditional forms of political participation, the Internet has opened up new forms of political activity which are important in their own right and may also be stepping stones to more traditional forms of political involvement. This is already a significant and growing form of engagement as 37 % of Internet users report that they have contributed to the creation of news, commented about it, or disseminated it via postings on social media sites like Facebook or Twitter.²¹

More generally, the ability of citizens to talk to each other and to talk back to elites is greatly enhanced by the Internet and related technologies. Many blogs host lively and sophisticated conversations impossible before. As well, the near ubiquitous “comment” section on news articles and the practice of journalists hosting their own blogs allows a heretofore impossible conversation between those who produce and those who consume the news. Coupled with the rise of citizen journalists, this creates the potential for a much richer, diverse, and democratic approach to producing political information. Indeed, The Pew Center for Internet and

19 Joe Trippi. 2004. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything*. New York: Harper Collins.

20 Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins and Michael X. Delli Carpini. 2006. *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life and the Changing American Citizen*. New York: Oxford University Press. Thomas Patterson. *The Vanishing Voter*. Robert Putnam. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

21 <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1523/state-of-the-news-media-2010>.

American Life found that the most common reason (72%) citizens gave for why they consume news is because they enjoy talking about it with friends family and colleagues.²²

In addition to providing opportunities for enhancing already existing forms of political participation and information gathering, the Internet increasingly connects us to global communities. Uploaded to the Internet, cell phone video of the death of an Iranian woman at the hands of government authorized militia bands helped galvanize worldwide attention to the protests following the 2009 elections. The Internet has brought information about the outside world into closed societies of varying degrees, from China to North Korea, which has bolstered burgeoning democratic movements. In the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake of 2010, tweets from the stricken island and the ease with which money could be donated online and through texting helped forge bonds of community between individuals in the developed world and the victims in Haiti. In each of these cases the Internet was crucial in creating unprecedented opportunities for raising global awareness of a variety of political and humanitarian crises.²³

Greater Availability of Information from a Wide Variety of Sources

While many lament the passing of the Age of Broadcast News, one of the limits of this system was that a small number of news outlets provided virtually the only perspective on events of the day. The consequences of press failures (both in the perspectives adopted and the stories covered or ignored) were extremely consequential. It also needs to be noted that the Age of Broadcast News was not successful at raising the knowledge levels of Americans: survey research has found that over the last fifty years, levels of general political knowledge have, at best, remained steady. So, despite increasing levels of education, Americans are no better informed about the world around them than they were at the outset of the Age of Broadcast News.²⁴

The Internet provides unprecedented access to the international press, smaller producers of political information, and the comments of ordinary people from around the world. While this requires a critical attitude towards sources of information, Americans increasingly recognize the benefits of diversity and now choose a varied news diet. Ninety-two percent of Americans get their information from more than one news platform and loyalty to any one news organization is disappearing.²⁵

22 http://pewInternet/~media/Files/Repoprts/2010/PIP_Understanding_the_Participatory_News_Consumer.pdf.

23 Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner. 2004. “New Media and Internet Activism: from the “Battle of Seattle” to Blogging,” *New Media and Society*, Vol. 6(1). New York: Sage.

24 Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

25 <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1523/state-of-the-news-media-2010>.

Citizen Journalism

While the prospects for professional journalism are declining, more and more ordinary citizens are reporting on issues which are of importance to them, but have been overlooked by professionals. Aided by hand-held devices and easy uploading and dissemination, this enhances the range of information on a wide variety of issues. It is clear that citizen journalists are not likely to provide an adequate replacement for professional journalism; however, it seems that there are exciting opportunities for developing more extensive cooperation and synergy between citizen and professional journalism. Some mainstream news organizations have begun to explore such possibilities by encouraging people to send their own video of breaking stories, but these efforts have not yet begun to tap fully the potential for greater citizen involvement. Indeed, the possibility of constructing a far more democratic and open political agenda may remedy one of the more significant shortcomings of the Age of Broadcast News.²⁶

Conclusion

Casting the impact of the Internet on democracy in the either/or terms of a debate is useful for defining and clarifying the many issues that this new medium raises. However, it is as important to remember that evaluating and responding to the Internet, or any new medium in the real world, does not involve such dichotomies. Even if you are convinced of the resolution, the Internet is clearly not going away. We need to take the arguments of this debate as a starting point for understanding and dealing with both the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet as an increasingly ubiquitous medium in our democracy.

We live in a moment when the Internet is still changing rapidly and its future will be shaped by a wide range of choices and policies made by individual citizens, private corporations and the government. As arguments over these choices continue – be they over questions of privacy, network neutrality, access to high speed connections, copyright, or the legitimacy of content requirements adopted by government – we need to take into account their democratic implications. The terms of tonight’s debate should help us remember these implications and provide a way of maximizing the democratic potentials and minimizing the political pitfalls of the Internet.

26 Bruce Bimber. 2003. *Information and American Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Clay Shirky. 2009. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin.