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UCSB Book Describes Effects of Internet on American Democracy

An engaged citizenry is crucial to the success of a democratic society. And throughout history, revolutions in communications technology, such as development of the penny press, radio, and television, have been accompanied by predictions that they would take American democracy to new heights of inclusion and informed decision-making.

Such claims have been made about the Internet as it takes its place as the latest advance in communication. But has the Internet, in fact, had any effect on American politics?

Yes, says Bruce Bimber, an associate professor of political science at the University of California, Santa Barbara and director of UCSB's Center for Information Technology and Society. But, as has been the case with other technological revolutions, the changes are a mixed bag of good and bad.

In "Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power"

(Cambridge University Press, 2003), Bimber compares development of the Internet to other information revolutions in American history. And he uses the lessons learned from those other events to add context and perspective for understanding the political influences of the Internet in the 21st century.

"Americans have long had a faith that technology is good for democracy," Bimber said, "This book is an argument that the faith is somewhat misplaced. New technologies – such as the Internet – don't necessarily improve democracy; they just make it different. They make it better in some ways, worse in others, and make no difference in still others."

How is the Internet making democracy better?

"It's making it easier for people to organize political advocacy groups around issues that concern them," Bimber said. "It makes it easier for people who are likeminded to find one another. Great changes are underway in the world of interest groups and civic associations."

The Internet works against democracy in the same way it serves it, Bimber said.

"The technology is intensifying personalized narrow-interest politics," he said. "While it makes it easier for like-minded people to find each other it also makes it easier for them to avoid people and information they don't agree with. The Internet makes it really easy for people to confine their experience of the world. This is in some ways the opposite of how the Internet is often hyped when people talk about it improving democracy.

"That's not a good thing."

Such special-interest consumption of news and information is in contrast to news presented by newspapers and, to a lesser extent, television news, Bimber said.

"Like it or not, newspapers perform a great service by agenda-setting, by saying here is what we think are the 40 most important things happening in the world today," he said. "So somebody confronting a newspaper in the morning is being surprised, seeing some issues they care about and maybe other issues they weren't even thinking about. Above all, they have a common, shared way of beginning to make sense of an overwhelming amount of information."

One of the key findings of Bimber's study was that the Internet has no effect on political engagement.

"It doesn't generate interest in politics," he said. "It only satisfies an interest in politics. The people who visit political Web sites are already pretty well-informed. Those who are disinterested and disengaged aren't going out there and poking

around."

Bimber argues that development of the Internet is the fourth major communication revolution in American history. The first was the rise of the mass newspaper in the 1820s and 1830s, which made newspapers available to all who could read. The second was the industrial revolution, which made society vastly more complex and posed new challenges to communication. And the third was the development of radio and television broadcasting.

Americans have always been optimistic about the effects of new technology on their lives and country, Bimber said.

"It's a common feature of the way Americans think of themselves and of their democracy," said Bimber. "We believe that technological developments are hooked up to social progress."

In some cases, notably the growth of penny press newspapers, that optimism was proved correct.

In other cases, the use of the technology fell short of most predictions. "People argued that radio was going to improve culture and make citizens better educated because they believed radio would be dominated by educational programming and culture content like opera," Bimber said. "The idea of entertainment-oriented mass popular radio was beyond them. They made the same mistaken prediction for television.

"There were great ideas about how the automobile was going to solve social problems and improve the quality of life in the cities," he said. "It was going to solve environmental problems – they really had that backward."

"And the airplane was going to make war obsolete," said Bimber. "We could extend commerce and interactions at a great distance. And once we got to know people in other cultures, we wouldn't want to fight them."

The Internet may not improve American democracy, Bimber says, but it certainly will affect the way we practice it.

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