

Richard Davis, **Politics Online: Blogs, Chatrooms, and Discussion Groups in American Democracy**, New York/London: Routledge, 2005, \$24.95 (paperback)

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In the days before the dotcom bubble burst, even the most skeptical scholar must have dreamt at least once about what the Internet discussion could mean for politics and democracy. The Internet consisted of an almost unlimited space for discussions. The discussions could be about everything and were to be held by everyone. This was closer to Habermas' concept of the public sphere, than what the 'old' media, brought, since they were only tools in the hands of big business. The public sphere was back, and better than ever!

However, after the burst of the dotcom bubble, everybody awoke from the dream. In the harsh reality that transpired it seemed that the online political discussion was mainly held by a couple of geeks and extremists. It was definitely not the elixir for democracy. On the other hand, with the growth of chats and blogs, online discussion still has a place in politics. In *Politics Online*, Richard Davis tells us why the Internet discussion has never become the asset to democracy that it potentially was. Somewhere between the far too optimistic notion about the return of the public sphere and the exaggerated pessimistic views that the lunatics have taken over the democratic asylum, Richard Davis gives empirical evidence on the instable relationship between online discussion and political representation.

In six chapters, an introduction and an appendix on the used methodology, Davis endeavors to answer two questions. The first is whether online political discussion could possibly represent public opinion in the eyes of political leaders, candidates, journalists, and others who seek understanding of the public's will. Whereas this first question points to the participants in the discussion, the second question looks at the online discussion as a public space. Davis tries to assess whether electronic discussion possesses the potential for usage as a tool for democratic governance, particularly as public space for political discussion and deliberation.

In five well structured, and very readable chapters the author mainly answers the first question. From chapter to chapter he narrows his focus from an overview of the political discussion at large toward the representativity of both posters and lurkers.

Chapter 1 starts with an account of the electronic political discussion at large. The most important differences between the various sorts of online interaction are aptly described. Not only does the author give an overview of the sorts of online interaction that currently exist, he also elaborates on the consequences of the differences between synchronous discussions, such as chats, on the one hand, and a-synchronous discussions such as weblogs on the other. A brief overview of the ins and outs of representation forms the end of the chapter.

Chapter 2 focuses on the political content in the world of electronic discussion. Davis gives an indication of the topics discussed in the various forums, and the way this takes place. Of course, the consequences described in chapter 1 return here, now filled with political content. In this account the author does not avoid the downside of online discussion. The fact that many of the discussion forums suffer from spam, trolls and flames, at the expense of the agenda-setting possibilities, is extensively discussed.

With chapters 3 and 4, the focus shifts from the list – the channel – to the users. To assess whether online discussion can possibly represent public opinion it is deemed necessary to have an overview of the demography of the online discussant. Mainly based on data collected by the Pew Research Center in 1999, it turns out that people involved in online discussions are more likely to be man, young, and well educated. In terms of news consumption, the online discussants tend to use online news clearly more often than nondiscussants.

However, no difference could be found in the use of the traditional news sources. The same proportion of discussants and nondiscussants watch television news, listen to radio news, and read newspapers. The political portrait of online discussants is also surprisingly similar to that of nondiscussants. Discussants are not more often republican or democrat than nondiscussants. The most striking difference between the two groups is found in the voter turnout. Online discussants are less inclined to register as voter, and to actually vote.

Chapter 4 is the most remarkable chapter in the book. It is on posters and lurkers, the latter being people who watch the online discussion but do not participate actively in it. Since lurkers are hard to catch, they have often been overlooked. It is one of the biggest assets this book delivers, that lurkers are taken into account here. The way Davis gives the lurkers a part in this study is equally rewarding. He compares the demography, the media use and the political attitudes of posters and lurkers and concludes that lurkers are far more comparable to the average American citizen than the posters.

Chapter 5, *virtual representation*, turns out to be a summary of the two foregoing chapters. The posters as well as the lurkers are compared to the general public in order to answer the question whether the online discussants can act as a representation of the general public. Of course the answer is negative. Although the lurkers have demographic and political characteristics that are more or less equal to those of the American voter, the posters – the voice to be heard in the discussions – are atypical.

The conclusions in chapter 6 come as no surprise. Davis answers the question whether online political discussion can possibly represent public opinion in the eyes of political leaders, candidates, journalists, and others who seek understanding of the public's will with an unequivocal 'no.' Posters, as well as the issues discussed are in no way representative for the American voters, or the issues that figure on their agendas.

The second question Davis poses in his introduction is whether online discussions offer potential for usage as a tool for democratic governance. The answer to this question follows only in the concluding

chapter 6. In my opinion, this subject deserved more attention, instead of the demographic etc. characteristics that are mapped in three chapters.

Politics Online gives an adequate introduction to the world of political chats, discussions lists, and blogs. From the broad overview the book focuses on the political content, and on the users in a very well structured manner. However, two subjects could have been presented in a different way. Within the book, the main focus lies with the characteristics that the online discussants, posters or lurkers, do possess. These characteristics are compared to those of the American voter to substantiate the conclusion that online discussants cannot be seen as representative for the general public. The content of the discussion is pointed at, but only briefly. Moreover, the author is so much determined to confirm his conclusion of unrepresentativeness that he ignores the similarities that do exist, such as the similarity in media use and political attitudes.

A second thought I had about the book is that the central questions, and thus the conclusions, are based on the thought of representation. Of course, online discussions are in no way representative for what goes on in politics or even society at large. But, on the other hand, that might be nothing less than the *strength* of the online discussions. It has been pointed out before that the online world cannot be a substitute for the real world, but it could be an extension of it. To put it more concretely, online discussions could bring issues and thoughts to the fore that are neglected in the mainstream discussions. In a following book this could be more at the center of the discussion.

Politics Online gives in all respects a very well structured overview of what is out there in those Usenets, Listservs, chats and blogs. It could easily be used for a course on online political talk. That the book eventually comes to the not-so-surprising conclusion that all this online talk can never replace offline political discussion, can be taken for granted, or serve as a basis for discussion in class, online or offline.