

Preface

In the midst of history

Politics is changing. The sudden relevance of Howard Dean's campaign for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination, which broke all records for fund-raising by a Democratic candidate, has transformed political professionals and journalists' perception of the Internet as a tool for organizing. Groups like MoveOn.org on the left and Grassfire.org on the right have pioneered issues-based activism, challenging older special interest operations for supremacy on their respective wings of the political spectrum. The rise of blogs and email discussions, to name just a couple applications of the Internet to discourse, have produced new pundits and centers of political influence in hyperspeed, as audiences and communities of interest form as quickly as headlines break. In every level of government, from cities accepting payments for traffic tickets or counties offering business and vehicle registration over the Net to state and federal agencies disclosing their activities through Web sites and email lists, the transformation to a digital government is underway. Public debate about the direction government should take has reached a critical mass that could transform the very notion of democratic systems, if citizens take the initiative and seize the reins of power from the professionals struggling to regain control of the process.

Indeed, politics is always changing as society incorporates new technology for disseminating information and connecting people. We have to be optimistic about the trend toward increasingly sophisticated use of technology in government and politics, since it is an inevitable aspect of history. From smoke signals to the press, local canvassing by candidates to nationally televised debates, the acceleration of political discourse through communications technology has been a faithful disruptor of accepted wisdom throughout human history.

Let's get something straight from the very beginning: Technology is disruptive because of the uses people put it to, it is not disruptive in and of itself, because if it is left unused it has no influence on the organization of society. Technology's social and political meaning is discovered through its use, as humans experience the way a technical hack changes the flow of information and power in a system. Think about any new technology introduced in the workplace during the past 30 years and it is plain that, while the inventor may have had an inkling of the way a product could change an organization, the actual scope and impact of organizational change is the result of people arguing over, evangelizing about, and stumbling to new arrangements of people and resources in a company, an industry or an economy.

People change history and they use tools to do it. This is an important supposition when considering what will happen to politics because of the Internet. The adoption of application software and physical and logical protocols is deeply related to the availability of resources to bring these investments to fruition. Even as the Internet reshapes the communications universe a second and, probably, more powerful movement is preparing the ground for a new crop of tools that are based on open source technology that can be shared at low cost and modified by any user to create new features or emphasize certain functionality. As the global economy becomes increasingly interconnected, the availability to low-cost information technology—for we are moving from the early adoption phase of the information economy, when every new feature came at a high price, to a time when hundreds of millions of people have the basic skills that allow them to piece together an information technology-based solution to myriad communications, logistical and organizational challenges. The mechanics are taking over, bringing computational wizardry to the masses and, as a result, the masses are poised to take over the public discourse for the first time since Walter Cronkite set the national water-cooler agenda with his comments after the Tet Offensive that turned the tide of American opinion about the Vietnam War:

To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. On the off chance that military and political analysts are right, in the next few months we must test the enemy's intentions, in case this is indeed his last big gasp before negotiations. But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.

This is Walter Cronkite. Good night.¹

Since February 27, 1968, television reigned supreme as the national forum for political debate. In the meantime, the concentration of ownership of television stations has continued unabated, so that today fewer than a half dozen corporations frame the political questions of the day, and mostly in terms of a horse race or a tabloid scandal.

Today, the television networks are struggling to stay in control of the political debate as hundreds of thousands of Web sites, weblogs and mailing lists recast what has been a relatively uniform view of events into a kaleidoscopic debate. And, as the number of hues of political information increases, the power of the television networks can be decreased exponentially; if bloggers and online pundits and debating societies in mailing lists decide not to follow the basic script from television that describes every political encounter of a winner and a loser, who's up, who's down and what the extremes of public opinion add up to at the end of each day.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who surveyed the young American democracy in the 1830s would understand quite clearly what is at stake today. It is far too convenient to believe that today's technology is something utterly new or that it makes something utterly new possible for the first time. Consider this statement by author Rebecca Blood, an avid blogger²:

A weblog is something fundamentally new. Something no one can quite put their finger on, not yet. And those who try to define the phenomenon in terms of current institutions are completely missing the point.

Consider the average weblog. Maintained by an unpaid enthusiast, this site will be updated perhaps a dozen times a day with links to interesting news stories and entries on other weblogs, accompanied by a few lines - or paragraphs - of commentary. A blogger interested in current events may include links to several accounts of one event, noting differences in tone or detail, another may post the occasional recipe or pictures from a recent trip. A blogger may have a thousand readers, but more likely a few hundred or a couple of dozen, some of whom will offer comments of their own, right on the site. The weblog is at once a scrapbook, news filter, chapbook, newsletter, and community.

This is not passive news consumption. Neither is it broadcasting. The average blogger has time to surf the web, but no resources to report stories. Some bloggers will follow

¹ Reporting Vietnam, Part One, p. 582

² "The revolution should not be eulogised," by Rebecca Blood. The Guardian Unlimited, December 18, 2003. URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/online/weblogs/story/0,14024,1108306,00.html>

a news story to the end, some may lose interest after a few days. Commentary will range from the fully-formed to the random blurt and can freely mix the public and the personal.

All this represents something new: participatory media. And it matters. Not because of its resemblance to familiar institutions, but because of its differences from them.

We believe participatory media is something significant and important, an opportunity society should not pass by, that should not be missed after the 30 year pause in individual thinking represented by television's ascendancy. But, participatory media is nothing new, we are merely being given another shot at taking up the challenge of participating in the public debate about what events of the day mean to the individual, the state and society. Tocqueville describes exactly the same phenomena in the United States during the 1830s³:

In the United States printers need no licenses, and newspapers no stamps or registration; moreover, the system of giving securities is unknown.

For these reasons it is a simple and easy matter to start a paper; a few subscribers are enough to cover expenses, so the number of periodical or semiperiodical productions in the United States surpasses all belief. The most enlightened Americans attribute the slightness of the power of the press to this incredible dispersion; it is an axiom of political science that there the only way to neutralize the effect of newspapers is to multiply their numbers. I cannot imagine why such a self-evident truth has not been more commonly accepted among us. I can easily see why those bent on revolution through the press try to see that it should have only a few powerful organs; but the official partisans of the established order and the natural supporters of existing laws should think that they are reducing the effectiveness of the press by concentrating it—that is something I just cannot understand. Faced by the press, the governments of Europe seem to me to behave as did the knights of old toward their enemies; they observed from their own experience that centralization was a powerful weapon, and they want to provide their enemy herewith, no doubt to win greater glory by resisting him.

Rebecca Blood's "something new" is Tocqueville's "axiom of political science," that the proliferation of sources of news and analysis decreases the power of a dominant source of information. A bit later in *Democracy in*

³ de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*, Perennial Classics Edition, HarperCollins, New York, 2000. p. 184

America, Tocqueville describes the blogging writing style unmistakably as characteristic of democratic media⁴:

Then there comes the long catalog of political pamphlets, for in America the parties do not publish books to refute each other, but pamphlets which circulate at an incredible rate, last a day, and die.... By and large the literature of a democracy will never exhibit the order, regularity, skill, and art characteristic of aristocratic literature; formal qualities will be neglected or actually despised. The style will often be strange, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, and almost always strong and bold. Writers will be more anxious to work quickly than to perfect details. Short works will be commoner than long books, wit than erudition, imagination than depth. There will be a rude and untutored vigor of thought with great variety and singular fecundity. Authors will strive to astonish more than to please, and to stir passions rather than to charm taste.

This isn't to say that the potential for the Internet to change the political landscape is diminished in any way, rather it suggests that we could very well make something extraordinary happen to political discourse globally now that we are presented an opportunity to use a medium that can be accessed from any home, office or café, which supports a wide range of publishing and communications channels, and transcends the one-way media of the past 100 years with a truly interpersonal venue for debate and the discovery of common interests and compromise.

The whole history of democracy and technology has set the stage for what happens next. This book is about how to make the most of the opportunity, for, as we said before, our humanity compels us to be optimistic about the growing dependence of governments, governance and political debate on new technologies of communication. —M.R.

⁴ *ibid*, pp. 470 and 474