

Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics

Edited by
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t&f proofs

First published 2009
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

© 2009 Editorial selection and matter, Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard;
individual chapters the contributors

Typeset in Times New Roman by
Taylor & Francis Books
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Routledge handbook of Internet politics / edited by Andrew Chadwick and
Philip N. Howard.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Internet – Political aspects. 2. Political participation – computer network resources.
3. Communication in politics – computer network resources. I. Chadwick, Andrew.
II. Howard, Philip N. III. Title: *Handbook of Internet Politics*. IV. Title: *Internet Politics*.
HM851.R6795 2008

320.0285'4678 – dc22

2008003045

ISBN 978-0-415-42914-6 (hbk)

ISBN 978-0-203-96254-1 (ebk)

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>List of figures</i> | ix |
| <i>List of tables</i> | x |
| <i>List of contributors</i> | xii |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | xvi |
| 1 Introduction: new directions in internet politics research <i>Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard</i> | 1 |
| Part I: Institutions | 11 |
| 2 The internet in U.S. election campaigns <i>Richard Davis, Jody C Baumgartner, Peter L. Francia, and Jonathan S. Morris</i> | 13 |
| 3 European political organizations and the internet: mobilization, participation, and change <i>Stephen Ward and Rachel Gibson</i> | 25 |
| 4 Electoral web production practices in cross-national perspective: the relative influence of national development, political culture, and web genre <i>Kirsten A. Foot, Michael Xenos, Steven M. Schneider, Randolph Kluver, and Nicholas W. Jankowski</i> | 40 |
| 5 Parties, election campaigning, and the internet: toward a comparative institutional approach <i>Nick Anstead and Andrew Chadwick</i> | 56 |
| 6 Technological change and the shifting nature of political organization <i>Bruce Bimber, Cynthia Stohl, and Andrew J. Flanagin</i> | 72 |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|-----|
| 7 | Making parliamentary democracy visible: speaking to, with, and for the public in the age of interactive technology <i>Stephen Coleman</i> | 86 |
| 8 | Bureaucratic reform and e-government in the United States: an institutional perspective <i>Jane E. Fountain</i> | 99 |
| 9 | Public management change and e-government: the emergence of digital-era governance <i>Helen Margetts</i> | 114 |
| Part 2: Behavior | | 129 |
| 10 | Wired to fact: the role of the internet in identifying deception during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign <i>Bruce W. Hardy, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Kenneth Winneg</i> | 131 |
| 11 | Political engagement online: do the information rich get richer and the like-minded more similar? <i>Jennifer Brundidge and Ronald E. Rice</i> | 144 |
| 12 | Information, the internet and direct democracy <i>Justin Reedy and Chris Wells</i> | 157 |
| 13 | Toward digital citizenship: addressing inequality in the information age <i>Karen Mossberger</i> | 173 |
| 14 | Online news creation and consumption: implications for modern democracies <i>David Tewksbury and Jason Rittenberg</i> | 186 |
| 15 | Web 2.0 and the transformation of news and journalism <i>James Stanyer</i> | 200 |
| Part 3: Identities | | 215 |
| 16 | The internet and the changing global media environment <i>Brian McNair</i> | 217 |
| 17 | The virtual sphere 2.0: the internet, the public sphere, and beyond <i>Zizi Papacharissi</i> | 230 |

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 18 | Identity, technology, and narratives: transnational activism and social networks | 246 |
| | <i>W. Lance Bennett and Amoshaun Toft</i> | |
| 19 | Theorizing gender and the internet: past, present, and future | 261 |
| | <i>Niels van Doorn and Liesbet van Zoonen</i> | |
| 20 | New immigrants, the internet, and civic society | 275 |
| | <i>Yong-Chan Kim and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach</i> | |
| 21 | One Europe, digitally divided | 288 |
| | <i>Jan A. G. M. van Dijk</i> | |
| 22 | Working around the state: internet use and political identity in the Arab world | 305 |
| | <i>Deborah L. Wheeler</i> | |
| | Part 4: Law and policy | 321 |
| 23 | The geopolitics of internet control: censorship, sovereignty, and cyberspace | 323 |
| | <i>Ronald J. Deibert</i> | |
| 24 | Locational surveillance: embracing the patterns of our lives | 337 |
| | <i>David J. Phillips</i> | |
| 25 | Metaphoric reinforcement of the virtual fence: factors shaping the political economy of property in cyberspace | 349 |
| | <i>Oscar H. Gandy, Jr. and Kenneth Neil Farrall</i> | |
| 26 | Globalizing the logic of openness: open source software and the global governance of intellectual property | 364 |
| | <i>Christopher May</i> | |
| 27 | Exclusionary rules? The politics of protocols | 376 |
| | <i>Greg Elmer</i> | |
| 28 | The new politics of the internet: multi-stakeholder policy-making and the internet technocracy | 384 |
| | <i>William H. Dutton and Malcolm Peltu</i> | |
| 29 | Enabling effective multi-stakeholder participation in global internet governance through accessible cyber-infrastructure | 401 |
| | <i>Derrick L. Cogburn</i> | |

| | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 30 | Internet diffusion and the digital divide: the role of policy-making and political institutions | 415 |
| | <i>Kenneth S. Rogerson and Daniel Milton</i> | |
| 31 | Conclusion: political omnivores and wired states | 424 |
| | <i>Philip N. Howard and Andrew Chadwick</i> | |
| | <i>Bibliography</i> | 435 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 487 |

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The virtual sphere 2.0

The internet, the public sphere, and beyond

Zizi Papacharissi

This chapter first traces dominant narratives on private and public opinion, beginning with an overview of the public sphere, examining models that oppose or supplement the public sphere, and leading into work that examines the internet as a public sphere. As a second step, distinct conditions that moderate the democratizing impact of the internet are identified and explicated. First, the self-centered nature of online expression lends a narcissistic element to political deliberation online, which is distinct from the objectives of the public sphere. Second, patterns of civic engagement online suggest selective uses of online media to supplement the representative model of democracy and mobilize subversive movements. Finally, the proliferation of online public spaces that are part commercial and part private suggests a new hybrid model of public spaces, where consumerist and civic rhetoric co-exist. These three recent developments are used to question whether the public sphere is the most meaningful lens from which to evaluate the democratizing potential of online technologies.

“Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.”

(Melvin Kranzberg, 1985: p. 50)

“Technology is a mirror of society, not a ‘neutral’ force that can be used for good or evil.”

(Lasch, 1987: p. 295)

The potential of online media generates a multitude of responses and reactions. Most are centered around the ability of digital and online media to simultaneously restrict and empower individuals as they interact with each other in public life. Thus, the use of the internet, the operative medium here, as it converges and sustains multiple technologies, becomes an asset or a detriment, depending on how it is put to use. The internet, from this point of view serves as a tool, and does not contain the agency to effect social change. Individuals, on the other hand, possess differing levels of agency, based on which they can employ the internet to varying ends,

effects, and gratification. While it is important to avoid the deterministic viewpoint that online technologies are able to, on their own, “make or break” a public sphere, it is also necessary to understand that technologies frequently embed assumptions about their potential uses, which can be traced back to the political, cultural, social, and economic environment that brings them to life. Therefore, it is not the nature of technologies themselves, but rather, the discourse that surrounds them, that guides how these technologies are appropriated by a society. Both Kranzberg’s (1985) and Lasch’s (1987) descriptions of technology

as “non-neutral” or a “mirror of society,” acquire meaning as they position technology within a particular discourse. Kranzberg (1985) recognizes technology as a historically relative construct that possess neither evil nor good inherent characteristics, but at the same time is not neutral; it is actualized by and within the historical context that delivered it. Lasch (1987) frames technology as the mirror that exposes the inadequacies, the merits, and the hopes of a society. Thus, individuals are likely to respond to technologies, but even more so, to the discourse that surrounds them. The future of technology rests on the metaphors and language we employ to describe it (Gunkel and Gunkel, 1997; Marvin, 1988).

The discourse surrounding the political potential of online news media could be located in the tension between the “private” and the “public,” as articulated in contemporary democracies. Online media lend themselves to several uses, but they acquire agency as they enable the renegotiation of what is considered private and what is considered public in public life. Thus, a political opinion posted on a blog or a video parody posted on YouTube present an attempt to populate the public agenda, and a potential, privately articulated challenge, to a public agenda determined by others. In the truest form of democracy, negotiation of that which is considered public and that which is considered private takes places within the public sphere. As defined by the architect of the concept, Jurgen Habermas, the public sphere presents “a realm of our social life, in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (Habermas, 1974: 49).

Quite distinct from, but reliant on, the constructs of the public, public space, and public opinion, the public sphere facilitates rational discourse of public affairs directed toward the common good, and it operates autonomously from the state

and/or the economy (Garnham, 1990; Habermas, 1974). The modern public sphere, according to Habermas, plagued by forces of commercialization and compromised by corporate conglomerates, produces discourse dominated by the objectives of advertising and public relations. Thus, the public sphere becomes a vehicle for capitalist hegemony and ideological reproduction. Naturally, a digital medium such as the internet, with an infrastructure that promises unlimited and unregulated discourse that operates beyond geographic boundaries, would suggest a virtual reincarnation of the public sphere.

Utopian rhetoric habitually extols the democratizing potential of media that are new (e.g., Bell, 1981; Davis *et al.*, 2002; Johnson and Kaye, 1998; Kling, 1996; Negroponte, 1998). Dystopian rhetoric conversely cautions against enthusiasm regarding the democratizing potential of medium that currently operates on a 17 percent global penetration rate (World Internet Usage and Population Statistics, www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm, accessed April 2007). Others characterize the democratizing potential of the internet as simply vulnerable (e.g., Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001). This chapter examines the democratizing potential of online media, as articulated through relevant theory, research, and online practices.

This essay first traces dominant narratives on private and public opinion, beginning with an overview of the public sphere, examining models that oppose or supplement the public sphere, and leading into work that examines the internet as a public sphere. As a second step, distinct conditions that moderate the democratizing impact of the internet are identified and explicated. First, the self-centered nature of online expression lends a narcissistic element to political deliberation online, which is distinct from the objectives of the public sphere. Second, patterns of civic engagement online suggest

selective uses of online media to supplement the representative model of democracy and mobilize subversive movements. Finally, the proliferation of online public spaces that are part commercial and part private suggests a new hybrid model of public spaces, where consumerist and civic rhetoric co-exist. These three recent developments are used to question whether the public sphere is the most meaningful lens from which to evaluate the democratizing potential of online technologies.

The premise of the public sphere

Academic discussions of civic engagement typically pay tribute to the concept of the public sphere, as conceptualized by Jurgen Habermas (1967/74) in his seminal work. The public sphere presents a domain of social life in which public opinion is expressed by means of rational public discourse and debate. The ultimate goal of the public sphere is public accord and decision-making, although these goals may not necessarily routinely be achieved. Agreement and rational deliberation are desirable outcomes; however, the value of the public sphere lies in its ability to facilitate uninhibited and diverse discussion of public affairs, thus typifying democratic traditions.

The public sphere must not be confused with public space. While public space provides the expanse that allows the public sphere to convene, it does not guarantee a healthy public sphere. The public sphere also serves as forum for, but is conceptually distinct from, the public, public affairs, or public opinion. According to Habermas (1974), “public opinion can only come into existence when a reasoning public is presupposed,” and that is what distinguishes it from individuals expressing mere opinions, or mere opinions about public affairs, opinions expressed within

simple proceedings that are made public, or a public consisting of individuals who assemble. Because, according to Habermas, the public sphere has been compromised to the point where its actual existence is in doubt, it is best understood as a metaphor for “a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere—that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane politics of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities” (Habermas, 1973: p. 351).

The historical context evoked by this definition places the public sphere at odds with feudal authorities, and in the modern era, with the state. Within the liberal model of the public sphere, mass media play a critical part in informing and directing public opinion, especially since mass society simultaneously abridges gender/class/race borders and renders direct communication among varying public constituencies more difficult. It is Habermas’ argument that the commercialized mass media have turned the public sphere into a space where the rhetoric and objectives of public relations and advertising are prioritized. Commercial interests, a capitalist economy, and mainstream media content have colonized the public sphere and compromised rational and democratic public discourse extinct, with television frequently playing a vanguard role (Habermas, 2004).

This point of view resonates with leading communication scholars. Carey (1995), for instance, articulated how a capitalist economy and the private sector may further amass commercial culture that crowds out the democratic objectives of a public sphere. Specifically relating to the mass media, Putnam (1996) examined a variety of institutional “suspects” responsible for the decline of civic engagement

in the U.S., to conclude that television is responsible for displacing time previously devoted to civic affairs and promoting passive involvement with politics. Similarly, Hart (1994) argued that some media, such as television, “supersaturate viewers with political information,” and that as a result, “this tumult creates in viewers a sense of activity rather than genuine civic involvement” (Hart, 1994: p. 109).

Additional conditions associated with the transition to industrial and post-industrial modern and postmodern society contribute to a deteriorating public sphere and declining interest in politics. For instance, in contemporary representative models of democracy, politicians, opinion leaders, and the media frequently rely on aggregations of public opinion obtained through polls, as opposed to the rational exchange of opinions fostered by the public sphere. Herbst (1993) refers to such aggregations of public opinion as “numbered voices,” thus pointing to the substitution of individual and detailed personal opinion on public affairs with a concentration of viewpoints usually expressed in the bipolarity of the yes/no polling response format. Thus, deliberation of public affairs within the public sphere is postponed as citizens are called upon to express agreement or disagreement with prescribed options.

Such re-appropriation of the public sphere, combined with mainstream media narratives that commodify or simplify complex political issues, conjure up public skepticism among citizens who already have narrowly defined ways of becoming involved in public affairs within a representative democracy model. So, it is not simply that the media crowd the public sphere with commercial rhetoric, it is also that when they do choose to focus on public affairs they do so using frames that prioritize politicizing an issue rather than encouraging rational deliberation of it (Fallows, 1996b; Patterson, 1993). One

argument suggests that the prospect of civic participation is de-emphasized and skepticism is reinforced through negative or cynical coverage in the mass media, growing cynicism spreads in a spiraling manner (Cappella and Jamieson, 1996, 1997), producing a public that is further detached from the public sphere.

Several scholars find that the malaise over the public sphere overestimates civic engagement in past societies and civilizations, or the value of public agreement for a healthy democracy. For instance, Lyotard (1984) argued that Habermas overemphasized rational accord as a condition for a democratic public sphere, and argues that it is anarchy, individuality, and disagreement that have and can lead to genuine democratic emancipation. Lyotard’s dissent was founded in Derrida’s (1997) deconstructivist approach, who emphasized undecidability as the necessary constant in any form of public deliberation. Mouffe (2000, 2005) explicitly connected these ideas to contemporary, pluralist, democracy and posed the concept of agonistic pluralism as a more realistic alternative to the public sphere. Mouffe’s (2000) critique is based on the impossibility of true plurality within a modern or postmodern deliberative democracy. Thus, she proposed agonistic pluralism, as a “vibrant clash of democratic political positions,” guided by undecidability, and more receptive to the plurality of voices that develop within contemporary pluralist societies than the deliberative model (Mouffe, 2000: p. 104). Specifically, the “agonistic” approach acknowledges the real nature of its frontiers and the forms of exclusion that they entail, instead of trying to disguise them under the “veil of rationality or morality” (Mouffe, 2000: p. 105). Mouffe’s (2000, 2005) emphasis on the agonistic foreshadows modes of political expression that have been popularized through the internet, including blogging, YouTube privately produced

content, and discussion on online political boards.

The notion of exclusion from the public sphere is also present in Fraser's (1992) work, who suggested that Habermas' examples of past, romanticized public spheres excluded women and non-propertied classes and proposed a post-industrial model of co-existing public spheres or counterpublics, which form in response to their exclusion from the dominant sphere of debate. These multiple public spheres, though not equally powerful, articulate, or privileged, exist to give voice to collective identities and interests. Schudson's (1998) historical review of past political activity further questioned the actual existence of a public sphere, and argued that public discourse is not the main ingredient, or "the soul of democracy," for it is seldom egalitarian, may be too large and amorphous, is rarely civil, and ultimately offers no magical solution to problems of democracy (Schudson, 1997).

Perhaps it is more meaningful to view the public sphere as a metaphor that suggests a mode and ideal for civic participation and interaction, as Habermas originally intended. Within this context, online media, including the internet, could host a virtual sphere or revitalize the public sphere. Several scholars have looked into this question and examined how online media serve as political discussion forums, encourage deliberative or direct models of democracy, and ultimately revive civic participation in public affairs.

The virtual sphere 1.0

Scholarship examining the public sphere potential of the internet has been typically divided into utopian and dystopian visions, which praise civic participation online or question the actual impact of

online deliberation, or do both. In these scholarly examinations, researchers tend to be concerned with the following three aspects of online communication, as they directly affect the social and political capital generated by online media: *access* to information, *reciprocity* of communication, and *commercialization* of online space (e.g., Malina, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002; Sassi, 2000).

Access to information

While the internet and surrounding digital technologies provide a public space, they do not necessarily provide a public sphere. Greater *access* to information, enabled by online media, does not directly lead to increases in political participation, or greater civic engagement, or trust in political process (Bimber, 2001; Kaid, 2002). The advantages of the internet as a public space can be enjoyed only by the select few who have access to it, thus harboring an illusion of an open public sphere (Pavlik, 1994; Sassi, 2005; Williams and Pavlik, 1994; Williams, 1994). With the global digital diffusion presently at 17 percent (North America: 70 percent, Oceania: 54 percent, Europe: 39 percent, Asia: 11 percent, Africa: 4 percent, Latin America: 17 percent, Middle East: 10 percent) it might be more appropriate to discuss local, regional, or national public spheres over a global public sphere. Moreover, while digitally enabling citizens (Abramson *et al.*, 1988; Grossman, 1995; Jones, 1997; Rash, 1997), online media simultaneously reproduce class, gender, and race inequalities of the offline public sphere (Hill and Hughes, 1988). Finally, the information access the internet provides also typically results in entertainment uses of the medium (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000; Shah *et al.*, 2001), the public sphere relevance of which is arguable (Moy *et al.*, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005).

Access can also be understood as greater access to political elites that shape the public agenda, and the ability for these elites to communicate directly with the electorate. Thus, in addition to enabling access to information, online media make it possible for privately motivated individuals and groups to challenge the public agenda (e.g., Grossman, 1995; Rash, 1997), connect the government to citizens, and allow for two-way communication, through interactive features (e.g., Abramson *et al.*, 1988). Still, greater access to information and communication channels does not ensure increases in civic engagement, and could simply generate the illusion of “a sense of activity rather than genuine civic involvement” (Hart, 1994: p. 109). Online political conversations can be as easily dominated by elites as offline ones. Access to information does not guarantee that information will be accessed. Similarly, access to information does not render an electorate more active or efficacious.

Reciprocity

Online media enable conversations that can transcend geographic boundaries. They also allow for relative anonymity in personal expression, which could lead to empowered and uninhibited public opinion. Still, the technological potential for global communication does not ensure that people from different cultural backgrounds will also be more understanding of each other (e.g., Hill and Hughes, 1998). The deliberative model may either be globalized or tribalized, based on the motivations of the political actors that put it to use. Several scholars argue that in order for online discussion to be democratizing, meaning that it must involve two-directional communication, cover topics of shared interest, and be motivated by a mutually shared commitment in rational and focused discourses. These

elements afford online conversations a degree of *reciprocity*, which can truly help connect citizens of democracies, rather than reproduce fragmented spheres of conversation.

Specifically, online discussion of public affairs can connect citizens sharing similar motivations but may also reproduce and magnify cultural disparities (e.g., Mitra, 1997a, 1997b; Schmitz, 1997). Scholars routinely point to online political discussions that are too amorphous, fragmented, dominated by few, and too specific to live up to the Habermasian ideal of rational accord. While relative anonymity enables political expression online (Akdeniz, 2002), that expression does not always result in discussion of greater substance or political impact (Jones, 1997; Poster, 1995; Schement and Curtis, 1997). Online communication typically takes place among people who already know each other offline (Uslaner, 2004). Research conducted by Jankowski and van Selm (2000) indicated that online discussions seemed to be dominated by elites and seldom extended to the offline sphere of interaction. Other analysis of online political deliberation revealed that collective use of the internet can lead to greater political participation, but only when it is characterized by trust and reciprocity (e.g., Kobayashi *et al.*, 2006). Studies examining the connection between online political talk and social capital found that the social connections people make online do not necessarily promote trust; on the contrary, evidence suggests that online forums frequently bring together mistrusting people (Uslaner, 2004).

Commercialization

Finally, *commercialization* presents a primary concern for researchers who examine the potential of the virtual sphere. The internet has gradually transitioned into an online multi-shopping mall and less of a

deliberative space, which influences the orientation of digital political discussion. As a medium constructed within a capitalist context, the internet is susceptible to the profit-making impulses of the market, which do not traditionally prioritize civic participation or democratization (O'Loughlin, 2001; Schiller, 1999, 2006). While equipped with an open architecture that resists commercialization (Lessig, 2006) it is not immune to commercial objectives (McChesney, 1995; Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996). For instance, in a study of how an online democracy project measured up to the public sphere ideal, Dahlberg (2001) demonstrated how such projects, while partially successful, ultimately are unable to attract a sizeable portion of the population and are frequently "marginalized by commercial sites, virtual communities of common interest, and liberal individualist political practices" (Dahlberg, 2001: p. 615). Employing the Habermasian concepts of colonization and juridification, Salter (2005) showed how mainstream legal tendencies may restrict the democratizing potential of the internet. More importantly, the internet is unable to single-handedly "produce political culture when it does not exist in society at large" (McChesney, 1995: p. 13). Scholars also argue that the content featured online has yet to become distinct from that provided by traditional mass media or to draw in the average citizen in the manner traditional media do (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Margolis *et al.*, 1997; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002). Finally, through collaboration and mergers with media conglomerates, creative factions of the internet are colonized by the commercial concerns that standardize the content of traditional media (Davis, 1999; Margolis and Resnick, 2000).

Therefore, scholarly examinations of the internet as a public sphere all point to the conclusion that online digital technologies create a public space, but do not

inevitably enable a public sphere. Research so far has shown that *access* to information, *reciprocity* of communication, and *commercialization* are the three primary conditions that prohibit the transition from public space to public sphere. A new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere, in that a virtual space simply enhances discussion; a virtual sphere should enhance democracy. Similarly, given the nature of online deliberations, it would not be appropriate to even use the term virtual commons; the technologies at hand generate common space, but do not constitute "commons." However, this should not be interpreted as a predicament or a failure. It is not online technologies that fail the public sphere test; rather it could be the other around. This does not necessarily suggest a failure of the online political apparatus; it could merely suggest that the language we use to describe online technologies routinely underestimates their potential.

The virtual sphere 2.0

As individuals become more comfortable with online media, newer appropriations of the internet suggest interesting trends that pull us farther away from the public sphere ideal to a direction that is meaningful, but not what we may have expected. The remainder of this chapter examines these trends and how they articulate the democratizing potential of the internet in a way that has little in common with the Habermasian public sphere but more in common with contemporary public impulses and desires.

On the benefits of civic narcissism

Personalization, that is, the ability to organize information based on a subjective order of importance determined by the

self, presents an operative feature of online media such as the internet. Popular features of the internet, such as blogs or MySpace personal/private spaces thrive on personalization. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch (1979) described a self-centered culture that emerged following the political turmoil of the sixties, focused on self-improvement, “wrapped in rhetoric of authenticity and awareness,” and signifying “a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the recent past” (p. 4–5). Lasch was not describing historical trends that have escaped other historians. Media scholars have also picked up on and analyzed how the consequences and failures of sixties alternative politics have impacted the current relationship individuals have with media or the tendency of contemporary media to abandon historical perspective (e.g., Hart, 1994; Gitlin, 1980, 1983; Patterson, 1993; Putnam, 1996; Schudson, 1998). Moreover, social and political scientists have visited the lasting impact social, economic, cultural, and economic changes brought on by modernity have had on value and belief systems. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) have taken a comparative look at modernity, cultural changes, and democracy across developed and developing societies, to conclude that post-industrialization has ratified a transition from existential to self-expression values. Self-expression values are connected to the desire to control one’s environment, a stronger desire for autonomy, and the need to question authority. Self-expression values are not uncivic, and have frequently lead to subversive or collective action movements on environmental protection, fair trade, and gender equality.

It is within a postmodern culture that emphasizes self-expression values that this particular breed of civically motivated narcissism emerges. It should be clarified at this point that the term narcissism is not employed in a pejorative manner or in its

pathological sense, which would imply a personality disorder. Narcissism here is employed to understand the introspection and self-absorption that takes place in blogs and similar spaces, and to place these tendencies in historical context. Lasch’s work, over psychological research on narcissism as a personality disorder, serves an apt starting point. Narcissism is defined as a preoccupation with the self that is self-directed, but not selfishly motivated. Narcissism is referenced as the cultural context within which blogs are situated, and not as a unilateral label characterizing all blogs.

Blogs are defined as web pages that consist of regular or daily posts, arranged in reverse chronological order and archived (Herring *et al.*, 2004). Initially heralded as a groundbreaking development in the world of reporting and media, blogs bear considerable democratizing potential as they provide media consumers with the opportunity to become media producers (Coleman, 2005a, 2005c). However, despite the audience and public pulpit that blogs provide, they typically regress to self-confessional posts that resemble diaries, with few exceptions that engage in journalistically informed punditry (Papacharissi, 2007). Research has shown that blogs can broadly be divided into A-list blogs (popular publicized blogs); blogs that are somewhat interconnected; and the majority of sparsely socially connected and less conversational blogs (Herring *et al.*, 2005). At the same time, there are many instances in which bloggers exerted sizeable influence over mainstream media, usually by creating noise over issues or political candidates initially marginalized by mainstream media (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005; Tremayne, 2006). Several major news outlets, including CNN, use blogs as “a finger on the pulse of the people” substitute and routinely feature stories or content on what “the blogs” are reporting on a given day. Other mainstream outlets,

like the *New York Times*, have incorporated blogging into their traditional reporting, and use it to provide in-depth reporting and/or indulge specific journalist story interests. Varied and diverse as they may be, news blogs frequently function as gateways for mainstream media coverage.

Blogs, video blogs (vlogs), and similar expressions present an articulation of what Scammell (2000) terms “consumer-style critique” (p. 354). Within this context, they are symptomatic of a hedonistic and materialistic culture, which, in Althusserian sense, “interpellates” its citizens as consumers. Political thoughts expressed on blogs are narcissistically motivated in that they are not created with the explicit purpose of contributing to a public sphere, the commons, or heightening civic engagement. While it is true that occasionally they impact mainstream media and public opinion in a sizeable manner, blog content is determined by subjective inclinations and tendencies based on a personal evaluation of content. Quantitative analysis of blogs finds them to be largely self-referential (Papacharissi, 2007) and motivated by personal fulfillment. Even news oriented, A-list blogs present a *mélange* of public and private information that is subjectively arrived to and removed from western standards of the journalistic profession (objective or partisan). Bloggers blog because they simply want to.

This particular breed of political expression is self-serving and occasionally self-directed, but should not be mis-characterized as selfish. Similarly, Lasch understands narcissistic behavior as structured around the self, but not motivated by selfish desire. Ironically, narcissistic behavior is motivated by the desire to connect the self to society. Lasch acknowledges the insecurity embedded in narcissism, but proceeds to place that narcissism within the “sense of endless possibility” pitted against “the banality of the social order”

contemporary Americans find themselves overcome with (p. 11). According to Lasch, the self-preoccupation associated with the culture of narcissism “arises not from complacency but from desperation” with a society that does not provide a clear distinction between public and private life (p. 26). In moments of variable insight bloggers engage in typical secondary strategies of the narcissist: “pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humor” (Lasch, 1979, p. 33). The new Narcissus, according to Lasch (1979), gazes at his/her own reflection “not so much in admiration as in unremitting search of flaws, signs of fatigue, decay,” structuring a performance of the self that is reminiscent of the theatrical, as explicated by Erving Goffman (1959) in the seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. On blogs, the expression of public opinion on private forums (or the expression of private opinion on a public forum—the blogger constantly plays with this distinction) becomes a carefully orchestrated performance with the other in mind.

This particular breed of narcissism has a democratizing effect. The subjective focus of blogs and similar forums encourages plurality of voices and expands the public agenda. While narcissistically motivated, blogs are democratizing in a unique manner. As Bimber (2000) argues, while online technologies “contribute toward greater fragmentation and pluralism in the structure of civic engagement,” their tendency “to deinstitutionalize politics, fragment communication, and accelerate the pace of the public agenda and decision making may undermine the coherence of the public sphere” (pp. 332–3). With their focus making a private agenda public, blogs challenge the established public agenda in an anarchic manner. This lack of coordination or concentrated civic objective limits the contribution to the public sphere, and exemplifies how

online technologies enhance democracy in ways tangential to, but not directly connected with, the public sphere. While blogs and similar vehicles (e.g., YouTube.com) dilute the agenda-setting function of traditional news sources, they still present personalized media environments (Swanson, 2000), and as such, have a limited contribution to the greater good objectives of the public sphere.

Atomized uses of online media by individuals in their homes do not constitute a public or a public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005), but they do successfully make the political environment more “porous” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000). Blogging should not be mistaken for journalism, nor should it be mistaken for a public sphere. Its value lies in demonstrating the conflict between what is private and public; a venerable and timeless conflict that is stressed by online technologies. The type of self-absorption we see on blogs is a play, a constant game with what others define as public or private and what the blogger believes should be defined as public or private. This online user and citizen is interested in challenging what is defined as private and what is defined as public. Priorities here lie in broadening and overlapping private and public agendas; not reviving the public sphere.

Direct representation and subversion: pluralistic agonism

Initial reaction to the democratizing potential of online media was filled with the hope that citizens would employ the media for the deliberative discourse of public affairs that is emblematic of the public sphere. The inherent assumption was that digital media would inject our representative model of democracy with a healthy dose of direct democracy. Recent research on how citizens make use of online media worldwide, however, indicates

that, while political use of new media is vast, it does not fit the mold of the Habermasian public sphere and promotes direct democracy selectively. Specifically, while citizens are increasingly drawn to digital media, they are attracted mostly to interest group and non-partisan websites (Cornfield *et al.*, 2003). Digitally connected citizens still prefer websites of major media outlets or TV for information on public affairs over internet based news organizations (Kohut, 2003).

Additional research indicates that political party websites are successful in reaching out to young voters, but are unable to connect with people who have so far remained aloof toward politics (Jensen, 2003; Boogers and Voerman, 2003). Availability of information alone is unable to sustain and encourage civic engagement (Marcella *et al.*, 2002). Those connected enjoy participating in online polls and circulating political jokes and cartoons, but are not drawn to conventional formats of political content online (such as news releases and endorsements) (Cornfield *et al.*, 2003).

On the opposite end, politicians employ digital media mostly to conduct political research, enhance two-step flow communication with other media and opinion leaders, invite donations to political causes, and publicize news releases and endorsement (Cornfield, 2004a). Online political discussions that feature politicians do enjoy greater participation, but are frequently dominated by politicians who employ them to advocate for their agendas (Jensen, 2003). Uses of digital media by politicians and the media tend to be one-directional and do not sustain feedback channels for the digital public or enable substantive citizen involvement.

Additional research points out the capacity of digital media to connect and sustain subversive movements. Subversion of mainstream political objectives by alternative movements, while not built

in to the traditional Habermasian model, presents an operative aptitude of digital media. The role of the internet in shaping the anti-globalization movement specifically highlights this aptitude, and better fits within Fraser's model of counter-publics that compete to articulate a voice within the public sphere. The Zapatistas' use of the internet for political subversion presents a renowned example (e.g., Langman, 2005). Anti-globalization websites are instrumental to (a) establishing movement formation, (b) shaping movement collective identity, and (c) mobilizing movement participants and organizations in a fluid manner (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002). Simone (2006) found similar consensus and mobilization use of the internet by CODEPINK, a self-identified women's movement for peace. Pickard (2006) explicated the centrality of the internet in Seattle's Indymedia activist efforts. To this point, Davis (1999) found that the internet reinforces existing patterns of political participation, which primarily serve traditional activists and/or citizens active beyond the norm. Similarly, the internet is essential to non-profits and community associations seeking access to the mainstream media agenda (Jensen *et al.*, 2007; Kenix, 2007). Average voters and politically disinterested citizens employ the internet in a less goal-directed manner. Typically, online media succeed in mobilizing political expression and serving as complements or alternatives to traditional media (Shah *et al.*, 2005).

In societies that are undergoing political transition, access to alternative media online becomes important. For instance, for users in Russia and the Ukraine, sites of online-only newspapers are of primary importance and online versions of offline news outlets, along with politician websites, only minimally used (Semetko and Krasnoboka, 2003). Similarly, in a study of advocacy blogs in Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet republic of Central Asia, Kulikova

and Perlmutter (2007) found that samizdat (unofficial) blogs provided information not available through mainstream media, but essential in articulating vocal opposition to the republic's leadership and supporting the "tulip revolution."

Through this exemplary review of recent studies, it becomes obvious that citizens go online to complement or substitute their uses of traditional communication and directly represent their opinions, when possible and necessary. Politicians and media institutions, on the other hand, make use of digital media to supplement their own agendas and objectives, as they see fit. This model of use may ultimately have a democratizing effect, but does not bear a direct resemblance to the public sphere. Moreover, digital media prove adept at furthering mobilization and subversive action. These types of uses evoke Schudson's (1998) model of monitorial citizens, who "scan (rather than read) the informational environment ... so that they may be alerted on a variety of issues ... and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways" (p. 310). Not to be mistaken as inactive or uninformed, monitorial citizens are "defensive," rather than "proactive," surveying the political scene, looking "inactive, but [poised] for action if action is required" (p. 311). In the same vein, and adapted to the context of the internet, Bimber's (1998) model of "accelerated pluralism" presents a more accurate portrayal of the democratic role of the internet as contributing "to the ongoing fragmentation of the present system of interest-based group politics and a shift toward a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence" (p. 135).

Contemporary uses of the internet suggest citizen confusion in directly engaging the public sphere. Some of the confusion is associated between the paradox of civic engagement in representative

democracy, labeled by Mouffe (2000), among others, as the “democratic paradox.” Mouffe (2000) argues that “Democracy requires the existence of homogenous public sphere, and this precludes any possibility of pluralism” (p. 51). Most political scientists subscribed to the more tempered viewpoint that, while civic engagement in representative democracy is not an impossibility, it is, nonetheless, a compromise (e.g., Coleman, 2005c). For instance, Coleman’s (2005c) conceptualization of the “directly-represented” citizen presents a compromise between direct and representative democracy. Direct representation, enabled through online media, Coleman argues, “offers many of the same benefits as direct democracy, but fewer of the burdens,” thus allowing “citizens the prospect of representative closeness, mutuality, coherence, and empathy without expecting them to become full-time participating citizens.” With the incorporation of subversive activities enabled by the internet to this model, we are left with a set of online digital media that do not revive the public sphere, but inject a healthy dose of plurality to a maturing model of representative democracy.

In the same vein, the examples of online activity reviewed here reflect a challenge to authority and the need for the expression of individual political identity. Acts of online mobilization and subversion are aligned with Inglehart and Welzel’s (2005) model of human development, which suggests that as societies are able to cater to the existential needs of individuals, citizens then progress to individual autonomy, thus emphasizing self-expression values more. Rising self-expression values do not lead to decline in all civic activities, but they do promote new political habits, “linked with higher levels of political action, focused on making elites more responsive to popular demands” (p. 194). Contemporary political uses of the internet reflect these tensions.

To this point, several argue that models of politics structured around collective identities present an inadequate way of understanding political activity in a more “reflexive,” or “liquid” society (e.g., Bauman, 2005; Beck *et al.*, 1994; Giddens, 1990). Diminished participation in the public sphere, online or offline, reflects a move to newer modes of civic engagement, which might be understood better through Mouffe’s (2005) proposal of agonistic pluralism and agonistic confrontation. Agonistic pluralism is formulated in contrast to the dialogic pluralism of the public sphere, and is aimed at radically transforming existing power relations. Mouffe (2005) employed the concept in a different context, to specifically call for the reinsertion of right and left into everyday politics, yet the concept is useful in understanding the effect of online subversive movements on democracy. While not all instances of subversion described here have successfully destabilized the existing power structure, they originated as adversarial, possess elements of what Mouffe (2005) terms a “conflictual consensus,” and attempt a real confrontation based on a shared set of rules and despite disparate individual positions (p. 52). Mouffe (2005) defined agonism as a “we/they relation” where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that they are adversaries, operate on common symbolic ground and see themselves as belonging to the same association. In this context, “the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism” (p. 20). While agonists do not function outside the spectrum of the public sphere, they are less concerned with public accord and more with self-expression and voicing disagreement. Thus, the direct representation and subversive capabilities of online media enable agonistic expressions of dissent that do not necessarily empower the public sphere, but enhance democracy.

Commercially public spaces: a model of hybrid influence

Early speculation on the democratizing impact of the internet addressed the possibility of online forums being subsumed by corporate entities and interests (McChesney, 1995; Schiller, 1999, 2006). From a political economy perspective, it is inevitable that as information technologies enter the capitalist market, they become commodified so as to enter the mainstream or perish to the margins. Within this context, several online forums emerge as alternatives to mainstream media, but easily forfeit their singularity as they merge with larger corporate entities and become corporate brands themselves. Numerous companies have gone through such cycles, including AOL being bought by Time Warner and gradually losing its unique place on the market, Excite being merged into AT&T and failing to retain its competitive share of the market, and Napster first being sued by music conglomerates, then eventually partnering with entertainment and telecommunications companies to launch a semi-successful online music venture.

More recently, Google, the on-again-off-again auctioning of Facebook, the YouTube/Google partnership, and the incorporation of MySpace.com into News Corporation present some of the latest ventures currently being valued in the present market cycle (and will likely have undergone significant transformations by the time this chapter goes to print). Like their predecessors, these companies gain stature by challenging conventional media business and attracting new audiences. Media scholars ascertain that as new ventures become commodified, they transition from public spaces to commercial spaces, and thus compromise their democratizing potential. However, this cycle is not that simple or predictable, and conceptualizing market dynamics through the dualities of

marginal and mainstream, while not inaccurate, frequently detracts from observing important trends.

For instance, the recent examples of online music vendors running Tower Records offline stores out of business, or Blockbuster being forced to adopt a half offline, half online model so as to compete with NetFlix, indicate that the influence of online ventures on traditional media has a more far-reaching and long-term effect than expected. Viacom's current ongoing suit of YouTube on digital copyright reveals not only outdated regulatory and market mentalities about copyright law, but also how deeply threatened media giant conglomerates are by smaller, but more flexible, online entities. The recent marketing decision of all major networks to make primetime shows available through their own websites, shortly after they air on TV presents a formal recognition of changes to the market and audience structure effected by entities offering on demand content, for free (peer-to-peer file exchange) or nominal charges (iTunes, Tivo).

Thus, the rigid model of mainstream conglomerates subsuming the smaller marginal firms is being gradually replaced by a model of hybrid influence. This should not suggest that marginal online ventures and the alternative interests they represent are no longer commodified, or that the larger conglomerates are being subverted. However, through a gradual process, which unfolds over the long term, the dynamics of the market are actively challenged and conglomerates are being forced to adopt a more flexible structure that can more easily adapt and serve an audience that has become more selective, elusive, and whimsical. This development produces conglomerates with a more fluid and transient structure; firms that must not only include, but adopt, the practices of the marginal firms they buy out so as to survive. What does

this imply for the democratizing potential of online media? Online public spaces do not become immune to commercialization. However, they become adept at promoting a hybrid of commercially public interaction that caters to audience demands and is simultaneously more viable within a capitalist market.

The case of YouTube presents such an example of a commercially public space. YouTube contains vast amounts of audiovisual content, presented in an amorphous format that makes the site virtually impossible to monitor or regulate. Some of this content violates copyright, in that it blatantly reproduces content already copyrighted by other entities. Other types of content present creative re-workings of media content in ways that endorse the audience member as media producer, and promote political satire and dialog. Finally, YouTube also features original content that serves a variety of purposes, ranging from catching a politician in a lie to impromptu karaoke. This blend or hybrid of commercial and public interest is interesting enough to sustain audiences and viable enough to scare off conglomerates (YouTube was recently bought out by the more fluid-structured, medium-sized, Google and consequently sued by Viacom, who saw versions of its copyrighted content featured on YouTube web space). These commercially public spaces may not render a public sphere, but they provide spaces where individuals can engage in healthy democratic practices, including keeping a check on politicians, engaging in political satire, and expressing/circulating political opinions. These spaces are essential in maintaining a politically active consciousness that may, when necessary, articulate a sizeable oppositional voice, in response to concentrated ownership regulation (as described in McChesney, 2004) or U.S. foreign policy (as described in Hands, 2006). While distinct from the public sphere of the past, these tendencies

may present a more accurate reflection of contemporary and postmodern public needs and wants.

Conclusion

The public sphere, in its many forms and conceptualizations by a variety of scholars, presents a concept that allows us to understand civic engagement in historical context. As a construct, the public sphere also helps explicate the influence of the mass media on public discourse, in mass societies that employ varying models of capitalist markets and representative democracy. Research on the political potential of the internet is frequently rapt in the dualities of determinism, utopian and dystopian. In reviewing literature on the role of the internet in political life, Howard (2001) characteristically concluded that the first set of scholarship was “too favorable,” the latest “too somber” (p. 949). Scholarly research does not lend support to a virtual sphere, modeled after the public sphere. Moreover, uses that the public spontaneously invents for the internet are removed from the ideal of the public sphere, counter-publics, or similar conceptualizations. As Noam (2005), among others, argued, the internet is not “Athens, nor Appenzell, nor Lincoln-Douglas. It is, if anything, less of democracy than those low-tech places. But of course, none of these places really existed either, except as an ideal, a goal, or an inspiration” (p. 58).

Models that emphasize the plurality enabled by digital media (Bimber, 1998), contemporary citizen needs and wants (Schudson, 1997), and the ability of the internet to amplify political processes (Agre, 2002) present more realistic assessments of online media potential. Romanticized retrospectives of past and future civic engagement often impose language and expectations that curtail the true potential

of technologies of the present. The public sphere can be helpful in critiquing and contextualizing the political role of online media, but not in prescribing that role.

Public sphere rhetoric set aside, the question of the democratic relevance of online media remains. The trends identified in this essay capture more recent tendencies in online deliberative spaces. These tendencies are situated in narcissistically derived, civically beneficial expressions of political opinion present in blogs; subversive actions articulated in discourse that emphasizes plurality and agonism; and, finally, privately generated narratives published in commercially public spaces. These tendencies form as an extension of previous dimensions of the virtual sphere, identified as access, reciprocity, and commercialization. But, in both recent and earlier appropriations of online media, the tension between the “public” and the “private” is prevalent. The common thread among all these tendencies can be located in the individual, who operates civically in a political sphere that is founded about the tension between that which is considered public and that which is considered private. Participating in a *moveon.org* online protest, expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting content on YouTube, or posting a comment in an online discussion group represents an expression of dissent with a public agenda, determined by mainstream media and political actors.

Strikingly, these potentially powerful acts of dissent emanate from a private sphere of interaction, meaning that the citizen engages and is enabled politically through a private media environment located within the individual’s personal and private space. Whereas in the truest iterations of democracy, the citizen was enabled through the public sphere, in contemporary democracy, the citizen acts politically from a private sphere of reflection, expression, and behavior. Within

this private sphere, the citizen is alone, but not lonely or isolated. Connected, the citizen operates in a mode and with political language determined by him or her. Primarily still monitorial in orientation, the citizen is able to become an agonist of democracy, if needed, but in an atomized mode.

The private sphere is empowering, liquid, and reflexive. But, what happens to the public sphere, when all political action retreats to the private sphere? This transition from the prominent public realm to private spaces could equal alienation, in which “the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have been formed between the individual and his fellow men” is lost (Arendt, 1968: p. 4). It is precisely this “in-between,” which, as individuals act civically from the locus of the private sphere, is filled in by online digital media. Unlike offline digital media, online technologies possess “reflexive” architecture, responsive to the needs of multiple private spheres, which would be isolated were it not for the connectivity capabilities of online media.

Guide to further reading

As we look for contemporary metaphors and new language with which to describe and understand the political potential of online media, it is necessary to contextualize our assessments within human development. For those interested in the internet as a public sphere (or not, as I argued here), readings beyond the obligatory public sphere literature, should include a balanced combination of pontification and data reflecting social, political, economic, and cultural trends. Habermas (2004), in his recent writings (e.g., *The Divided West*), refers less to the public sphere, and more to concepts like cosmopolitanism, which could inform how a “global” citizen functions in an online

digital environment. Toby Miller's (2007) *Cultural Citizenship* traces the transition of citizenship from the political to the cultural realm, presenting an argument that could explain several behaviors we observe on online public environments. Zygmunt Bauman, in any of his books on liquid modernity (he typically publishes two every year), synthesizes contemporary social and political theory to provide a lively and accurate depiction of public life in the age of modernity and beyond. Any work by Manuel Castells sets the standard for interdisciplinarity,

and the complex interaction of socio-cultural factors to be considered as we interpret the meaning of contemporary technology. Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) more recent set of data and accompanying analysis trace a progression of human values that we all notice in our everyday lives, but lack the vocabulary with which to discuss. Finally, for a proper understanding of how social, political, economic, and cultural trends converge, I like to read the work of architects, and anything by Rem Koolhaas presents a good starting point.

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Legal cases

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- Universal City Studios v. Reimerdes*, 111 F. Supp. 2d 294 (U.S. Dist. 2000).

t&f proofs

- Abdullah, King of Jordan 311
- about this book 1–2; approach 2; collective intelligence 5; consumerism, political engagement through 6–7; critique and creativity, internet as combination of 428; democratic experimentalism 6; diversity of methodologies and evidence 427–28; findings in this collection 424–26; growth of field 2–3; informational value 6; interactivity 7–8; multiple domains of inquiry 426–27; negative roles of internet 425–26; omniverous news habits 430–32; online video 7–8; outline 8–9; panoramic perspective 9; platform for discourse, internet as 4–5; political content propagation 6–7; political omnivores, rise of 428–32; positive roles of internet 424–25; research directions 3–4; studying internet politics 426–28; surprising roles of internet 426; Web 2.0 4–8; wired states and political parties, rise of 432–33
- Abrahamson, J.B. *et al.* 234, 235
- Abrams v. United States* (1919) 352
- absent ties in social activism 253–54
- Accenture 116, 126
- access: and ability, variability in 181–82, 184; in Europe 289–300, 303–4; to information online 234–35, 236; maps, access to 345; material and physical access in Europe 291–94; physical access, emphasis on 301–2; policy solutions beyond limited access 182–83; skills access 294–97, 303; solution to access problem, policies for 300–303, 304; usage access 297–99, 303; World Information Access Project 40, 432–33
- Access Denied* (Deibert, R.J. *et al.*) 335n2
- Access Now v. Southwest Airlines* (2002) 351
- accountability in global media environment 229
- Acevedo, M. and Krueger, J.I. 74
- ACLU *et al.* 356
- activism: activist networks, technology and 249–50, 258; fall in Europe 26; relationships within 247; *see also* social activism
- Adam, A. 266
- Adamic, L. and Glance, N. 150
- Adams, J. 335
- Adams, P.C. and Rina, G. 281, 282
- Adkins, R.E. and Dowdle, A.J. 66
- advertising online 19–20
- agenda building online 194
- agonism, pluralistic 239–41
- Agre, P.E. 243
- Aguirre, B.E. and Saenz, R. 283
- Ahlers, D. 201, 206, 209, 211, 213
- Ahrens, F. 22
- Akdeniz, Y. 235
- Akrich, M. 268, 270
- Al-Jazeera TV* 207; global media environment 217, 218, 221, 224, 227, 228; new immigrants and civic society 285
- Alba, R.D. and Logan, J.R. 283
- Albrecht, S. 98
- Aldrich, J.H. 73
- Alexa Web Service 188
- Alexander, Lamar 14
- Algeria 306, 307, 308, 319
- Allan, S. 204, 205, 213
- Allen, A. 266
- Allen, George 22, 60, 69
- Allen, K. 209
- Alterman, J.B. 309, 310
- alternative media online 240
- Alternative Press Center* 205
- alternative sources of news 207–8
- Althaus, S.L. 144
- Althaus, S.L. and Tewksbury, D. 135, 192, 194, 234, 430
- Altintas, K. 335
- Alvarez, R.M. and Hall, T.E. 175
- Alvarez, R.M. and Nagler, J. 176
- American Legion 80
- American Library Association 182

- American Publishers Association (APA) 358
 Amnesty International 80
 Anderson, B. 280
 Anderson, C. 4–5
 Anderson, J. 320
 Anderson, K. 204
 Anderson, P.J. and Ward, G. 225
 Anderson, R. and Murdoch, S. 325
 Anderson, T. and Hill, P. 349
 Andrejevic, M. 6
 Ang, I. 313
 Annenberg Public Policy Center 131, 133, 137, 143n3
 Anstead, Nick 8, 56–71, 426, xii
Anthropolgy Today 320
 anti-globalization websites 240
 anti-Iraqi war marches 76
 AOL (America Online): Arab world, internet use and political identity 311; News on 205, 208, 209; public spaces online 242
 Appadurai, A. 275, 280, 286
 application sharing 412
 Applied Autonomy, Institute for 341
 AR (“argument repertoire”) 170
 Arab world, internet use and political identity 305–20; Algeria 306, 307, 308, 319; AOL 311; Arab blogosphere 314–16; Arab conversation, new openness in 313–14; Arab politics and new media 309–10; Bahrain 307, 308, 319; blogs, regional impact of 315; blogs and chat 314–19; blogs in Egypt, arrest for 310, 314–15; Cairo internet café, observation from 317–18; dissident action 310; Dubai Internet City project 311; Egypt 306, 307, 308, 310, 311–12, 314; Freedom House 313; further reading guide 319–20; internet and meanings, top-down approach 311–14; internet café users 309, 316–19; internet diffusion in context 306–10, 319; internet use and constructions of meaning 314–19; Iran 314; Iraq 307, 308; Jordan 306, 307, 308, 311, 312, 314; Jordan internet café, observation from 317–18; Kuwait 306, 307, 308; Lebanon 306, 307, 308; Libya 307, 308; Morocco 306, 307, 308; Oman 306, 307, 308; Palestine 307, 308; *Politics of Small Things* (Goldfarb, J.C.) 315–16; Qatar 307, 308, 313; REACH initiative in Jordan 314; satellite TV 309; Saudi Arabia 307, 308, 314; states and the internet 311–14; Syria 306, 307, 308, 314, 319; top-down approach to internet 311–14, 319; Tunisia 306, 307, 308, 314, 319; Turkey 306; United Arab Emirates (UAE) 306, 307, 308, 311, 313; World Competitiveness Report 313; Yemen 307, 308
 Archdeacon, T.S. 419
 ARD-ZDF 290
 Arendt, H. 97, 145, 244, 316
 Arianna 75
Arirang TV 286
 ARPANET 376, 384
 Arquilla, J. 335
 Arrow, Kenneth 359
 Ashby, W. 77
 AsiaInfo (Kyrgyz ISP) 333
 Associated Press 310
 Atkins, D.E. *et al.* 414
 Atkins, W. 224
 AT&T 242
 Attwood, F. 266, 267
 audience: independence of audiences of online news 187; limitations on audience input 210–11, 212; segmentation of 187; use of online news 190–92
 Aune, M. *et al.* 270
 Axelrod, R. 402
 Ayres, R.U. and Williams, E. 178
 Bahrain 307, 308, 319
 Baker, Norman 86–87
 Balganes, S. 352, 362
 Balkenende, Jan Peter 157
 Balkin, J. 349, 350
 Ball-Rokeach, Sandra J. 9, 275–87, 426, xii
 Ball-Rokeach, S.J. *al.* 276, 280, 286
 ballot measures: knowledge of 168–69, 171; online news consumption and 169
 Barber, B. 32, 170
 Barber, B., Mattson, K. and Peterson, J. 152
 Barcan, R. 271
 Barlow, J.P. 351
 Barnhurst, K.G. 189
 Barrett, Craig 408
 Barry, B. and Dauphin, J. 371
 Barsoum, G.F. 318
 Bartels, L. 144
 Barzelay, M. 118
 Baum, J. and Oliver, P. 100
 Bauman, Z. 227, 241, 245
 Baumgartner, F.R. and Jones, B.D. 350
 Baumgartner, F.R. and Leech, B.L. 78
 Baumgartner, Jody C. 13–24, xii
 Baym, N. 262
 BBC News 157
 BBC News 24 218, 221, 224
 BBC News Online 157, 204, 207, 209, 210, 221, 371
 Bebo 65, 221
 Beck, U. 251, 259
 Beck, U. *et al.* 241
 Becker, Gary 359
 Becker, L.B. and Dunwoody, S. 133
 Becker, L.B. and Whitney, D.C. 133
 Beckerman, G. 313–14, 315
 Beckert, J. 100
Behind the Blip (Fuller, M.) 383

- Bekkers, V. 170
 Bell, D. 231, 273
 Bellamy, C. and Taylor, J.A. 38, 116
 Bellin, E. 305
 Benford, R.D. and Snow, D.A. 248, 259
 Benkler, Y. 363, 374, 375
 Bennett, C.J. and Crow, L. 340, 344, 348
 Bennett, L. 136
 Bennett, L. and Serrin, W. 136
 Bennett, W. Lance 9, 73, 246–60, 425, xii
 Bennett, W.L. 32, 85, 151
 Bennett, W.L. and Lagos, T. 250
 Bennett, W.L. and Manheim, J.B. 154
 Bennett, W.L., Breunig, C. and Givens, T. 247
 Bennett, W.L. *et al.* 248, 255, 256, 259
 Benoliel, J. 362
 Berelson, B. 186
 Berger, B.L. 353
 Berkowitz, B.D. 335
 Berry, J.M. 74
 Best, S.J. *et al.* 191
 Bimber, B. and Davis, R. 14, 18, 19, 24, 55, 69, 71, 145, 147, 150, 155, 158, 236
 Bimber, B. *et al.* 8, 73, 75, 76, 79, 85, 171, 424
 Bimber, Bruce 33, 38, 72–85, 135, 145, 146, 147, 148, 154, 155, 171, 175, 176, 184, 234, 238, 240, 243, 254, 277, xii
 Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act (2002) 67–68
 Blair, Tony 61, 218, 220
 Blavin, J.H. and Cohen, I.G. 362
 Blears, Hazel 64–65
 blogs: Arab blogosphere 314–16; and chat in Arab world 314–19; in Egypt, arrest for 310, 314–15; election campaigns in United States 17, 20–21; global media environment 226; place blogs 204; public spaces online 237, 238; regional impact of in Arab world 315; Web 2.0 204–5
 Blumler, Jay 97
 Blumler, J.G. and Gurevitch, M. 231, 239
 Boase, J. *et al.* 152
 Boczkowski, P. 188, 189, 200, 429
 Boddy, W. 381
 Bogdanor, V. 65
 Bolter, J.D. and Grusin, R. 189, 200
 Bonfadelli, H. 168, 299, 415, 416
 Boogers, M. and Voerman, G. 239
 Bosmajian, H.A. 351
 bounded openness 373–74
 Bowers-Brown, J. 28
 Bowler, S. and Donovan, T. 161, 162, 163
 Bowler, Shaun 172
 Bradley, Bill 18, 19
 Bradley, C.D. 14
 Brailov, Marc 422
 Braman, S. 374
 Branton, R.P. 162
 Brasher, B.E. 281
 Brazil 417, 418–19
 Bretschneider, S. 117
 Bridges.org 372
 Brint, S. and Karabel, J. 100
 broadband: broadband opportunities 183; municipal broadband, potential for 182–83; narrowband *versus* broadband 299–300
 Broder, D. 161, 171
 Broder, J. 20
 Brody, R. 144
 Brosnan, M.J. 291
 Brouwer, L. 279
 Brown, Gordon 218
 Brown, Sherrod 22
 Browning, G. 24
 Brundidge, Jennifer 8, 144–56, 425, xii
 Bruns, A. 97, 213
Buckley v. Valeo (US Supreme Court, 1976) 67
 Bucy, E.P. *al.* 276
 Budge, I. 32, 38
 Buechler, S. 246
 Bunz, U. *et al.* 297
 bureaucratic reform and e-government in US 99–113; Bush administration, “Presidential management agenda” 104–6; business lines, building shared services 108–9; CDHS (California Department of Health Services) 110; Clinger-Cohen Act (1996) 105; Clinton administration, “reinvention of government” 102–4; cross-agency web portals 102–3; cross-agency initiatives 106–7; cross-agency relationships 111–12; E-Government Act (2002) 107, 108; e-government research, future prospects 111–12; FedBizOpps.gov 106; formal institutions 100; further reading guide 112–13; governance 107–8; Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA, 1993) 103, 105; government-to-government projects 106–7; ICTs 99, 100, 101–2, 105; informal institutions 100; initiatives and institutional developments (1993–2008) 102–9; INPHO (Information Network for Public Health Officials) 104; institutional research dimensions 111–12; institutions 100–101; local and state e-government developments 109–11; middle level institutions (“middleware”) 100–101; MIIS (Multi-level Integrated Information System) 101; NASCIO (National Association of State Chief Information Officers) 109, 110; NPR (National Performance Review) 103–4; OMB (Office of Management and Budget) 106, 107–8; oversight 107–8; President’s Management Agenda 105–6, 108; Quicksilver initiative 106–7; shared services 106–7, 108–9; societal internet uses 102–3; technological challenges 112; web-based

- government, development of 102; Weberian
 bureaucracy and American state 101–2
 Burke, A. *et al.* 266
 Burkhalter, S. *et al.* 170
 Burnett, R. and Marshall, P.D. 44
 Burnham, D. 116
 Burt, E. and Taylor, J. 31
 Burt, R.S. 100
 Burton, C. 420
 Burton, J. and Williams, F. 420
 Bush, George H.W. 14, 21
 Bush, George W. 15, 17, 18, 60, 132, 133, 134,
 138, 139, 165, 218, 228, 379–80; administration
 of 105, 108; administration of, “Presidential
 management agenda” 104–6
 Bush, J. 167
 Bushell-Embling, D. 340
 business bias on internet 134
 business lines, building shared services 108–9
 Butler, D. and Ranney, A. 172
 Butler, David 172
 Butler, J. 264
 Button, M. and Ryfe, D. 414
 Buxton, N. 30

 Cairo internet café, observation from 317–18
 Cameron, David 8, 61, 70
 Cammaerts, B. and Carpentier, N. 388, 389, 400n6
 Campaign for Freedom of Information (CFOI) 89
 campaigns: communications in US 15–17; finance
 in elections 66–68, 70; operations in US 15; *see*
also election campaigns in US; parties and
 election campaigns; social activism
 Campbell, A.A. *et al.* 175, 176
 Campbell, J. 135
 Campbell, J.E. 274
 Can, F. 262
 candidates: and campaigns in US 13–14; election of,
 direct democracy and 161–62; recruitment and
 selection of 65–66
 Cappella, J. *et al.* 167, 170
 Cappella, J.N. and Jamieson, K.H. 132, 136, 142,
 148, 233
 Cardoso, Fernando Henrique 388, 414
 Cardoso Report (2004) 398, 402
 Carey, J. 232
 Carlaw, K. *et al.* 374
 Cass, R.A. 353
 Cassidy, W.P. 188, 189
 Castells, M. 73, 277, 282
 Castells, M. and Himanen, P. 423
 Castles, S. and Davison, A. 282, 286
 Cave, J. *et al.* 385
 CDHS (California Department of Health Services) 110
 Ceasar, J.W. and Busch, A.E. 18
 censorship: Chinese censorship 224; globalization of
 online censorship 327–28; methods of
 investigating 326–27; Russian censorship 224–25;
 Saudi censorship 224; sophistication of
 censorship 328–30
 Center for Communication and Civic Engagement
 250
 Cerf, Vint 383n2
 Ceruzzi, P. 368
 Chadwick, A. and May, C. 117, 174
 Chadwick, Andrew 1–9, 24, 55, 56–71, 76, 212,
 250, 383n1, 399, 424–34, 426, 432, xii
 Chaffee, S.H. 191
 Chaffee, S.H. and Frank, S. 133, 140
 Chaffee, S.H. and Kanihan, S.F. 146
 Chaffee, S.H. and Metzger, M.J. 187, 424
 Chaffee, S.H. and Schleuder, J. 431
 Chaffee, S.H. *et al.* 151
 Chaffee, S.H., Zhao, X. and Leshner, G. 133
 Chalaby, J.K. 221
 Chan, B. 280, 282
 Chan, J.K.C. and Leung, L. 189
 Chang, J. 418–19
 Charles II 220
 Chen, P. 88
 Cheney, Dick 133
 Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA, 2000)
 357, 358, 361, 421
 China: blocking of internet 329; censorship in 224
 Chirac, Jacques 157
 Cho, J. *et al.* 299
 Choi, J.H. *et al.* 191
 ChoicePoint 341
 Chua, S.L., Chen, D.T. and Wong, A.F.L. 291
 Chung, D.S. 210–11
 Churchill, Winston S. 220
 CIA *World Factbook Online* 49, 417
Citizens as Legislators (Bowler, S., Donovan, T. and
 Tolbert, C.) 172
 civic society: consequences of internet use, past
 research on 135–36; engagement and internet
 use 276–77, 286; engagement in public spaces
 online 233–34; engagement relationship, new
 immigrants 282–86; as key stakeholder in WSIS
 387–90; narcissism, benefits of 236–39; and
 politics of participation 396–97, 398
 Clark, J. 32, 252
 Clark, J. and Themudo, N. 29
Clash of Civilisations (Huntington, S.) 227
 class and internet use 283
 classification of internet governance issues 395–96
 Clayton, R. *et al.* 331
 Clinger-Cohen Act (1996) 105
 Clinton, Hillary 13, 21, 23, 61
 Clinton, William J. 13, 14, 220, 420, 422;
 administration of 105, 107. 112; administration
 of, “reinvention of government” 102–4;
 Clinton-Gore re-election campaign 14
 closed circuit TV systems 339

- CNN 60; global media environment 217, 221, 222, 224, 225, 228; public spaces online 237; Web 2.0 203, 204, 206, 208, 209
- coalitions in networks 253–54, 258
- Cobb, R.W. and Elder, C.D. 177
- Cockburn, C. 268
- Cockburn, C. and Fürst-Dilić 270
- Cockburn, C. and Ormond, S. 268, 274
- Cogburn, Derrick L. 9, 401–14, 425, xii
- Cogburn, D.L., Johnsen, J.F. and Battacharrya, S. 410
- Cohen, E.A. 335
- Cohen, E.L. 188
- Cohen, J. 170
- Cohen, J.E. 351, 362
- Cohen, R. and Rai, S. 252
- Coleman, S. and Blumler, J. 97, 98
- Coleman, S. and Hall, N. 56
- Coleman, S. and Ross, K. 97
- Coleman, S. *et al.* 88
- Coleman, Stephen 8, 26, 38, 86–98, 237, 241, 425, xii
- collective action 72–73, 74–76
- collective action space 82
- collective identification 252–53
- collective intelligence from political web use 4, 5
- Collins, P.M. 353
- commercial filtering technologies 330–31
- commercialization of public spaces online 234, 235–36, 242–43
- communication environment: new immigrants and civic society 285–86; parties and election campaigns 68–70
- Communications Decency Act (CDA, 1996) 361, 421
- Community Technology Centers: digital citizenship 177, 183, 420; new immigrants and civic society 280
- Compaine, B.M. 179
- A Comparative Study of Referendums* (Qvortrup, M.) 172
- ComScore 203, 212
- Conboy, M. 217
- connectedness: and electoral web production practices 43, 48; and internet use 284–85
- Connecting Parliament with the Public* (House of Commons Select Committee on Modernization) 91
- Consalvo, M. 265
- Consalvo, M. and Paasonen, S. 273
- content analysis 325
- content filtering: commercial filtering technologies 330–31; geopolitics of internet control 325, 326–27, 328–30, 331, 332, 334, 335
- convergence of locational surveillance 340–41
- Converse, P.E. 134, 144, 197
- Cooke, L. 189
- Copsey, N. 33, 34
- Copyright Act (US, 1980) 367
- Cornell University Survey Research Institute 155n1, 427
- Cornfield, M. 14, 16, 18, 19, 21, 239
- Cornfield, M. and Rainie, L. 147
- Cornfield, M. *et al.* 239
- Corrado, A. 187
- Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act (1883) 68
- COTELCO (Center for Research on Collaboratories and technology Enhanced Learning Communities) 409
- Cowhey, P.F. 414
- creation of online news 188–89
- Cronin, B. and Davenport, E. 265, 266, 267
- cross-agency initiatives in bureaucratic reform 106–7
- cross-agency relationships and e-government 111–12
- cross-agency web portals 102–3
- cross-services integration and public management 122–23
- cross-subsidy on Web 2.0 209–10
- Crowley J.E. and Skocpol, T. 73, 74
- Crowston, K. and Williams, M. 44
- Cukier, Ken 408
- Cultural Citizenship* (Miller, T.) 245
- cultural diversity, stimulation of 303
- cultural globalization 227–28
- Curtis, Adam 227
- Cutting Code* (MacKenzie, A.) 383
- cyber-infrastructure, potential of 412–13
- “cybergrlls” 267
- cyberspace: experimentation in 263–65; metaphoric construction of 350–55; *see also* property in cyberspace
- cyborg theory 263
- cynicism 131, 132, 136, 137, 140, 142, 148, 233; corrosive cynicism 226; political cynicism 139
- Dacin, T. *et al.* 100
- Dahl, R.A. 134, 144, 152, 154–55
- Dahlberg, L. 236
- Dahlgren, P. 170, 234, 239
- Dahlgren, P. and Gurevitch, M. 203
- Daily Express* 210
- Daily Kos* 7, 20, 205
- Daily Telegraph* 211
- DailyMotion, Tunisian blocking of 323–24
- Dalton, R.J. 26, 27
- Dalton, R.J. and Wattenberg, M.P. 33
- Danet, B. 263
- Danziger, J. 102
- data: data flow, petabytes of 221–22, 223; importance of 4, 6; protection of, in EU 342–43, 346
- Davidow, W.H. and Malone, M.S. 81

- Davis, G.F. 24, 188, 200
 Davis, G.F. *et al.* 72, 85
 Davis, R. *et al.* 8, 39, 61, 425
 Davis, Richard 13–24, 58, 71, 135, 236, 240, 425, xiii
 Davis, S. *et al.* 24, 231
 Davison, R.M., Martinsons, M.G. and Kock, N. 402
 de Vreese, C.H. and Semetko, H.A. 158, 161, 162, 163, 172
 Dean, Howard 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 56, 60, 64, 65, 66, 68, 71
 decentralization 33, 35, 37, 198
 deception, role of internet in identification of 131–43; Annenberg Public Policy Center 131, 133, 137, 143n3; “business bias” 134; civic consequences of internet use, past research on 135–36; cynicism 132; *Dirty Politics: deception, distraction and democracy* (Jamieson, K.) 133; distribution of political information 134; experts, tyranny of 134; FactCheck 137; false claims, differentiation of 142; further reading guide 142; information, role in democratic society 134–35; National Annenberg Election Survey (2004) 137–42; National Annenberg Election Survey (2004), statistical analysis and results 139–42; presidential campaign, 2004 US 131–43; press, information and democratic society 133–37, 142; press fact and fiction 132; traditional news as custodian of fact 136–37; YouTube.com 131
 deference: global media environment 220; parliamentary democracy, visibility of 95–96
 DEG (“digital-era governance”) 114, 117, 120, 126
 Deibert, R.J. and Rohozinski, R. 334, 335
 Deibert, R.J. and Villeneuve, N. 325
 Deibert, Ronald J. 9, 323–36, 425, xiii
 deliberative impact of internet 159, 169–70
 della Porta, D. 252, 253, 259
 della Porta, D. and Tarrow, S. 252
 Delli Caprini, M.X. and Keeter, S. 134, 144
 Delli Carpini, M.X. and Williams, B.A. 148
 Delli Carpini, M.X. *et al.* 170
 demand-based online operations 90
Demanding Choices (Bowler, S. and Donovan, T.) 172
 Democracy Index 47, 49–50, 52
 democratic benefits of internet use 174–75
 democratic experimentalism on Web 2.0 4, 6
 democratic governments, bridging the divide 416
 democratic institutions and internet policy 421–22
 democratization: demos, democratic process and judgements of the 144; narcissism, effect of 238–39; ongoing process of 218–19, 229; potential of online media for 231
 Denning, D. 335
 Der Derian, J. 335
 Derrida, J. 233
 design of online news 189–90
 Dessauer, C. 188, 189, 200
 Deuze, M. 187–88, 188, 189, 201, 205, 210, 211, 213
 Devereaux, Zach 383n1
 DeWolfe, Chris 22–23
 D’Haenens, L. 284
 D’Haenens, L., Jankowski, N. and Heuvelman, A. 193
 D’Haenens, L., Koeman, J. and Saeys, F. 282, 287
 Dia, X. and Norton, P. 88
 Diani, M. 30, 253
 Diani, M. and Donati, P. 27
The Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, E.) 422
 digital changes in public management 123–25
 digital citizenship 173–85; access and ability, variability in 181–82, 184; broadband opportunities, comprehensive approaches to 183; Community Technology Centers 177, 183, 420; democratic benefits of internet use 174–75; digital divide, definition of 177–79; digital inequality, evolution of research on 177–78; digital inequality, factors driving 178–79; digital inequality, reduction of disparities 179; educational inequality, necessity of 183; frequency of use and activities online 181; further reading guide 184–85; information literacy 181–82; involvement in politics and government online 175–77, 183–84; Latinos, language and education problems of 180–81; minorities and technology 179–80; municipal broadband, potential for 182–83; National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) 177–78, 180, 182, 303; policy solutions beyond limited access 182–83; political disparities, internet and magnification of 176–77; politics and government online, growth and impact of 174–75, 183–84; poverty and segregation 180; race and ethnicity, role of 179–81; reading skills, critical nature of 182; segregation and concentrated poverty 180; technical skills 181–82; young, internet and promise of engagement of 175
Digital City (Amsterdam) 268–69
 digital deceit 331–33
 digital divide, definition of 177–79
 digital divide, internet diffusion and 415–23; Brazil 417, 418–19; country profiles 416–21; democratic governments, bridging the divide 416; democratic institutions and internet policy 421–22; economic development 415; Estonia 417, 419–20; further reading guide 422–23; interaction, mediation and 422; political factors 416; Singapore 417–18, 420; societal change 415–16; technical knowledge 415–16; United States 417, 418, 420–21
 digital divide, potential for widening of 144–45

- Digital Divide* (Norris, P.) 184
- digital division in Europe 288–304; access in Europe 289–300, 303–4; cultural diversity, stimulation of 303; digital literacy 303; disenfranchisement 303–4; electronic voting 304; further reading guide 304; inclusion, policy areas for 302–3; information society for all 302–3; interactivity 300; material and physical access 291–94; motivation for internet connection 289–91, 302–3; narrowband *versus* broadband 299–300; physical access, emphasis on 301–2; skills access 294–97, 303; social and cultural differences 300; solution to access problem, policies for 300–303, 304; usage access 297–99, 303
- digital enablement of Parliamentary communications 96–97
- digital-era governance, emergence of 119–25
- digital inequality: evolution of research on 177–78; factors driving 178–79; reduction of disparities 179
- digital literacy 303
- Digital Millennium Copyright Act (US, DMCA) 368
- digital repositories 411
- Digital Solidarity Fund 387
- digital technologies and intellectual property 368–70
- DiMaggio, P. and Celeste, C. 181
- DiMaggio, P. and Powell, W. 76, 84, 100, 107
- DiMaggio, P.J. 100
- Dimmick, J. *et al.* 190
- direct democracy: contexts of, variation within 5
European political organizations 32; mechanisms of 159–60; parliamentary democracy, visibility of 94–95; problems and prospects for 160–63, 171–72; processes of 157–58
- Dirty Politics: deception, distraction and democracy* (Jamieson, K.) 133
- disaggregation 118
- discovery in election campaigns in US 14–15
- discussion forums online 149–50
- disenfranchisement in Europe 303–4
- disintermediation 124; and democratic erosion 32
- dissident action in Arab world 310
- distribution of political information 134
- diversity: in online news 208–9, 212; in social activism 252–53
- The Divided West* (Habermas, J.) 244
- El-Diwanly, S. 313
- DNS tampering 333–34
- Doerschler, P. 283
- Doherty, B. 27, 28, 32, 33
- Dole, Bob 14
- Donohue, G. *et al.* 146
- Donovan, Todd 172
- Doppelt, J. and Shearer, E. 430
- Dougherty, M. and Foot, K. 46
- Dourish, P. 347, 348
- Dowell, W.T. 327, 335
- Downing, J.D.H. 152, 212
- Downs, A. 74, 146
- Drake, W.J. 399
- Drew, D. and Weaver, D. 169
- Drezner, D. 335
- Driscoll, C. 267
- DRM (“digital rights management”) 368, 369, 371, 374
- Drucker, P.F. 81
- Dubai Internet City project 311
- Dunleavy, P. and Margetts, H. 116, 118, 122, 123, 124, 126
- Dunleavy, P. *et al.* 112, 117, 118, 120, 127
- Dutta-Bergman, M.J. 190, 198
- Dutton, W.H. *et al.* 202, 385, 386, 392, 394, 398
- Dutton, William H. 9, 384–400, 425, xiii
- Duverger, M. 63
- Dworkin, Andrea 266
- Dwyer, P. *et al.* 60, 66
- dynamics: of change in global internet governance 404–5; of multi-stakeholder decision-making 395–97
- e-government: definition of 114; future prospects for research 111–12; research on 115–17
- E-Government Act (2002) 107, 108
- e-Government News* 183
- e-mail communications in US elections 16–17
- Ebbinghaus, B. and Visser, J. 26
- Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia 312
- Economist* 167, 408
- Edmiston, K.D. 110, 111
- education: inequality in 183; and internet use 283
- Edwards, John 20, 23, 65, 133
- Edwards, L. 170
- Egypt: Arab world, internet use and political identity 306, 307, 308, 310, 311–12, 314; Cairo internet café, observation from 317–18
- Ehrlich, E. 13
- Eickelman, D.F. and Anderson, J.W. 310
- Eid, G. 305
- Elcat (Kyrgyz ISP) 333
- Eldersveld, Samuel J. 62, 71
- election campaigns in United States 13–24; advertising online 19–20; blogs 17, 20–21; campaign communications 15–17; campaign operations 15; candidates and campaigns 13–14; discovery 14–15; e-mail communications 16–17; experimentation 14–15; exploration 14–15; fund-raising 18–19; further reading guide 23–24; home pages 16; internet, advent and popularization of 13; internet campaigning, history of 14; maturation 15–19; media-controlled

- online communication 19–21; mobilization 17–18; post-maturation, beyond candidate website 19–23; social networking 22; support networking 23; user-controlled online communication 21–23; video recording 21–22; volunteer recruitment 17–18; websites 16
- electoral web production practices 40–55; connecting 43, 48; Democracy Index 47, 49–50, 52; Engagement Index 47, 50, 52; Freedom House 49, 50; further reading guide 54–55; genre effects 52, 54; HDI (Human Development Index) 47, 49, 52; human development 49, 52; ICTs 41–42; informing 42–43, 46; inter-rater reliability 45–46; Internet and Elections Project 42, 44–45, 45–54; involving 43, 46–47; measurement of 45–51; mobilizing 43, 48–49; national developments, comparison of 49–50; New Media Index 47, 51, 52; Participation Index 47, 50, 52; political culture 44, 50, 51–52, 54; political development 43–44, 47, 49–50, 52, 54; political practices and cultures 41, 53–54; producer types 44–45, 51; site producer types 51, 52; spheres analyzed 55n2; technological development 49, 52; transnational technology diffusion 40; web practices, comparison of 46–49; web sphere, structures of 41; web spheres, power of genre in 51–52; World Values Survey (WVS) 50
- electronic voting 304
- elite demagoguery 154
- Elmer, Greg 9, 376–83, 425–26, xiii
- empowerment, Web of 266–68
- engagement: technological change and 80–82; *see also* political engagement online
- Engagement Index 47, 50, 52
- Engaging the Electronic Electorate (E4) Project 143n3
- Engel, M. 218
- Entman, R. 148, 248
- EPG (Electronic Publishing Group) 88–89
- Epstein, L.D. 62, 63
- ERS (Emergency Response System) 337–39
- ESD (Electronic Services Delivery) 123–24
- Estonia: digital divide, internet diffusion and 417, 419–20; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications 419–20
- Etzioni, A. 144, 350
- Eurobarometer 167, 168, 291, 428
- European Commission 301–2, 346, 347, 348
- European direct democracy 160
- European political organizations 25–39; activism, fall in 26; decentralization of control and authority 33; direct democracy 32; disintermediation and democratic erosion 32; equalization 32–33; further reading guide 38–39; geographical reach, extension of 28–29; hierarchies, flattening of 31; horizontal dimension 31; ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) 25–26, 32, 33; individuals within organizations, role of 27; internal democracy 27; internet as activist tool 29–30; internet as democratic tool 31; internet as outsiders' medium 32–33; internet as recruitment tool 28–29; interorganizational change 32–34, 38; intraorganizational change 28–31, 37–38; normalization 33–34; opportunity structures, categories of 35–36; organizational capacity 36; organizational incentives 36–37; organizational links, strengthening of 30; organizational reach, extension of 28–29; participation, decline in levels of 26–27; passivity, internet and 30; political participation and organizational change 26–28, 37–38; politics as usual 33–34; representative democracy, decline and crisis? 26–28, 37; strategies and activity online, framework development 34–37; supporter engagement, deepening of 29–30; systemic and technological opportunity structures 35–36; vertical dimension 31; virtual sphere, recruitment through 29; Web 2.0 30
- European referendums and online politics 166–67
- European Union (EU) 302–3, 342, 343, 346, 348
- Eurostat 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 298, 299, 428
- Evans, Karen 107
- Eveland Jr, W.P. 146, 187
- Eveland Jr, W.P. and Dunwoody, S. 186–87, 189, 191, 193, 199
- Eveland Jr, W.P. *et al.* 146, 190, 193
- evolution of media environment 217–21
- exclusion filtering 325
- experimentation, election campaigns in US 14–15
- experts, tyranny of 134
- Eyerman, R. and Jamieson, A. 253, 259
- Facebook 5, 21; gender, internet and theorizing on 270, 271; global media environment 221; parties and election campaigns 61; technological change and political organization 81; Web 2.0 202
- FactCheck.org 137, 143n1, 428
- fair trade campaigning 247–48, 255–56, 259
- Fairlie, R. 178, 180
- Fallows, J. 179, 226, 233, 430
- Faris, R. and Villeneuve, N. 328, 332
- Farrall, Kenneth Neil 9, 349–63, 426, xiii
- Farrell, D. and Webb, P. 27
- Farrell, D. *et al.* 59, 69
- Fauconnier, G. and Turner, M. 362
- FEAP (Federal Enterprise Architecture Programs) 121
- Fearon, J.D. 147
- FedBizOpps.gov 106
- Federal Communication Commission 342
- Federal Election Campaign Act (1971) 67

- Federal Election Commission 67
female sexuality, resignification of 267
feminine discourse 262; *see also* gender
Ferber, B. *et al.* 88
Ferdinand, P. 75, 423
Ferguson, R. 340
Festinger, L. 150, 151
Fielding, S. 26
filtering the public sphere 357–59; *see also* content filtering
Filzmaier, P. 88
Finn, P. 419
Finnegan, M. 22
Fisher, D. *et al.* 253
Fisher, W. and Ponniah, T. 256
Flanagin, A.J. *et al.* 76, 79, 81, 85
Flanagin, A.J., Stohl, C. and Bimber, B. 252
Flanagin, Andrew J. 72–85, xiii
Flavian, C. and Gurrea, R. 191
Flickr 21
Foot, Kirsten A. 40–55, 426, xiii
Foot, K.M. and Schneider, S.M. 24, 41, 42, 44, 48, 71
Foot, K.M. *et al.* 8, 50, 55n1, 57, 71, 426
For the Many or the Few (Matusaka, J.G.) 172
Forbes, Steve 14
Ford, Harold 21
form and content of online news 187–90
formal institutions 100
Forman, Mark 107
FOSS (“free and open-source software”) 370, 371–73
Fountain, Jane E. 99–113, 117, 127, 426, xiii
Fountain, J.E. and Osorio-Urzu, C. 113
Fox, Michael J. 21
Fox, S. 181
Fox, S. and Livingstone, G. 177, 180, 181
Fox News 207
fragmentation of online news 196, 199
Francia, Peter L. 13–24, xiii
Francia, P.L. and Hernson, P.S. 15
Franda, M. 320
Frank, D. 108
Franklin, B. 69
Franklin, M.I. 404
Franzen, A. 276
Fraser, N. 234, 316
Freedman, D. 206, 209, 213
Freedom Forum 428
Freedom House 218; Arab world, internet use and political identity 313; electoral web production practices 49, 50
Frey, D. 150
Friedlos, D. 340
Friere, P. 402
Frissen, P. 88
Froehling, O. 281
Froomkin, A.M. 355
Fulk, J. 81
Fulk, J. *et al.* 85
Fuller, J.E. 175
Fuller, M., 383
fund-raising in US election campaigns 18–19
further reading guide: Arab world, internet use and political identity 319–20; bureaucratic reform and e-government in US 112–13; deception, role of internet in identification of 142; digital citizenship 184–85; digital divide, internet diffusion and 422–23; digital division in Europe 304; election campaigns in United States 23–24; electoral web production practices 54–55; European political organizations 38–39; gender, internet and theorizing on 273–74; global internet governance, multi-stakeholder participation in 413–14; global media environment 229; information and direct democracy 172; locational surveillance 348; new immigrants and civic society 286–87; online news 199–200; openness, globalizing the logic of 375; parliamentary democracy, visibility of 98; parties and election campaigns 71; political engagement online 155; politics of protocols 383; politics of the internet, multi-stakeholder policy making 399; property in cyberspace, political economy of 362–63; public management change and e-government 127; public spaces online 244–45; social activism 259–60; technological change and political organization 85; Web 2.0 213
Galaskiewics, J. and Wasserman, S. 253
Galbraith, J.R. and Kazanjiam, R.K. 81
Gallagher, Michael 172
Galloway, A. 377, 383
Galston, W.A. 145
Galusky, W. 30
Gandy, Jr., Oscar H. 9, 349–63, 426, xiii
Gans, Herbert J. 134
Garnham, N. 231
Garrett, K.R. 150, 151, 152
Garrido, M. and Halavais, A. 252, 253
Garrie, D.B. 350
Garrison, B. 188
Garud, R. *et al.* 100
Gasco, M. 102
Gastil, J. 170
Gastil, J. and Crosby, N. 170
Gastil, J. *et al.* 145, 162
Gates Foundation 182
Geens, S. 323
Gelman, A. and King, G. 135
gender: as identity 264; and internet use 283; relationships in CMC 262, 264–65
gender, internet and theorizing on 261–74; “cybergrl” 267; cyberspace experimentation

- 263–65; cyborg theory 263; *Digital City* (Amsterdam) 268–69; embodied experience, importance of 264; empowerment, Web of 266–68; Facebook 270, 271; female sexuality, resignification of 267; feminine discourse 262; further reading guide 273–74; gender as identity 264; gender as social structure 271–72; gender bending 264; gender differences online 261–63; gender relationships in CMC 262, 264–65; ICTs 269, 270, 271; identity, gender as 261–65, 273; IRC (“internet relay chat”) 263; *Life on the Screen* (Turkle, S.) 263; male domination 262; marketing “the feminine” online 265; MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) 262, 263; multidisciplinary, need for 261; MySpace 270, 271, 272; pornography 265–66; situated practices and spaces 268–70; social structure, gender as 265–70, 273; techno-social spaces, uses of 268–69, 270–72; Web 2.0 270–72, 273; Web 2.0, new questions and outcomes? 270–72, 273; World Conference on Women (1995) 267; YouTube 270, 271, 272
- genre effects 52, 54
- geographical reach 28–29
- geopolitics of internet control 323–36; censorship, methods of investigating 326–27; Chinese blocking 329; commercial filtering technologies 330–31; computer network attack, blocking by 333–34, 334–35; content analysis 325; content filtering 325, 326–27, 328–30, 331, 332, 334, 335; DailyMotion, Tunisian blocking of 323–24; digital deceit 331–33; DNS tampering 333–34; exclusion filtering 325; globalization of online censorship 327–28; Google Earth 326; inclusion filtering 325; infrastructure of internet 324–26; internet connections, beneath the surface of 324–26; internet security companies 331; IXPs (internet exchange points) 324; localization filtering 329; OpenNet Initiative (ONI) 323–24, 326, 327, 329, 333, 335, 335n2; routers 325; sophistication of censorship 328–30; states, internet challenges to 323–24, 334; Tunisia 323–24; VOIP (“voice over internet protocol”) services 328–29
- Geras, Norman 226
- Gerber, E.R. 158, 171
- Gershon, P. 121, 122
- GESIS 291, 304
- Ghareeb, E. 306
- Ghoshal S. and Bartlett, C. 73
- Gibbs, J. *et al.* 284
- Gibson, O. 211
- Gibson, Rachel 25–39, 426, xiii
- Gibson, R.K. and Rommele, A. 35, 55
- Gibson, R.K. and Ward, S.J. 31, 55
- Gibson, R.K. *et al.* 29, 35, 39, 41–42, 55, 57, 61, 276
- Giddings, A. 73, 223, 241, 251, 259, 277, 286
- Giddings, P.J. 98
- Gitlin, T. 148, 237
- Global Deliberative Dialogue on Internet Governance 428
- global governance of IP 365–68
- global internet governance, multi-stakeholder participation in 401–14; application sharing 412; cyber-infrastructure, potential of 412–13; digital repositories 411; dynamics of change 404–5; emergent participatory practices 409–10; further reading guide 413–14; ICANN 406; IGF 408; international regimes, knowledge and networks 402–3; internet governance 403–5; multi-stakeholder participation, enablement of 410–13; participation, enablement of? 405–6; presence awareness 411; research questions, theoretical framework and 401–3; transnational policy networks 413; UN Global Alliance for ICTs and Development 408–9; UN World Summit on the Information Society 403–4; web-conferencing 412; WGIG 407–8; WSIS 406–7, 413
- global media environment 217–29; acceleration of information flow 222–23, 228; accountability 229; *Al-Jazeera TV* 217, 218, 221, 224, 227, 228; BBC News 24 218, 221, 224; Bebo 221; blogs 226; chaos rather than control 223–25, 228–29; Chinese censorship 224; CNN 217, 221, 222, 224, 225, 228; cultural globalization 227–28; data flow, petabytes of 221–22, 223; deference 220; democratization, ongoing process of 218–19, 229; evolution of media environment 217–21; expansion of information flow 221–22, 228; Facebook 221; further reading guide 229; globalized public sphere, evaluation of 225–27; interactivity, rise of 223; mass participation, rise of 223; MySpace 221, 223; Netscape Mosaic 221; online environment, complexity of 226; politics and internet 225, 228–29; *The Power of Nightmares* (Adam Curtis documentary) 227; real-time news 222; Russian censorship 224–25; Saudi censorship 224; top-down media apparatus 219–21; YouTube 221, 223
- Goffman, E. 238
- Goldfarb, J.C. 315–16
- Goldfarb, Z.A. 64
- Goldsmith, J. 335
- Goldsmith, J. and Wu, T. 335, 414
- Goldstein, B. 78, 335
- Google 345; Google Earth 326; Google News 205, 206; politics of protocols 377–78, 379; public spaces online 242, 243; symbiotic business model 380–82, 382–83
- Gorbachev, Mikhail 225
- Gore, Al 15–16, 17, 59, 103, 306
- Gore-Lieberman site 15
- Gore Report on Reinventing Government* (Gore, A.) 103

- Governance* 117
 government-citizen interaction 115, 123–25
 Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA, 1993) 103, 105
 government-to-government projects 106–7
 GPL (General Public License) 369–70
 Graber, D.A. 13, 151, 186
 Graf, J. and Darr, C. 175
 Graf, J. *et al.* 18, 19, 68
 Gramm, Phil 14
 Granick, J. 335
 Granovetter, M.S. 152, 253, 254, 260
 Grant, A. 68
 Gray, M. and Caul, M. 26
 Gray, V. and Lowery, D. 78
 Green, D.P. and Shapiro, I. 76
 Green, N. and Smith, S. 342–43
 Greene, A.M. *et al.* 31, 39
 Greenwood, R. and Hinings, C.R. 100
 Greenwood, R. *et al.* 100
 Greer, J. and LaPointe, M. 59
 Greer, J.D. and Mensing, D. 201, 202, 203
 Grignou, B. and Patou, C. 31
 Grossman, L.K. 24, 234, 235
Guardian 204, 207, 226
 Guarnizo, L.E. *et al.* 283, 284, 285, 287
Guerrilla News Network 205
 guide to further reading *see* further reading guide
 Guillén, M. and Suárez, S. 416
 Gunkel, D. 288, 289
 Gunkel, D.J. and Gunkel, A.H. 231
 Gunter, B. 201, 206, 213
 Gurak, L.J. 73
 Gustafson, K.E. 265
 GWACS (Government-Wide Acquisition Contracts) 121, 122

 Habermas, J. 82, 145, 155, 231, 232, 234, 235, 236, 239, 240, 244, 414
 Hachigan, N. 335
 Hacker, J.S. *et al.* 180
 Hacker, K.L. and van Dijk, J. 423
 Hackett, Paul 66
 Haddon, L. 270
 Hafkin, N. and Taggart, N. 309
 Hafner, K. and Lyon, M. 399
 Haggerty, K.D. and Ericson, R.V. 347, 348
 Hajnal, P.I. 423
 Halbert, D. 367, 375
 Hall, S. 276, 286
 Hammer, M. and Champy, J. 103
 Hampton, K.N. and Wellman, B. 276, 279
 Hanafi, S. 281
 Hands, J. 243
Hansard 88, 89, 90
 Hansard Society 92
 Harding, S.G. 268

 Hardy, Bruce W. 131–43, 425, xiii
 Hardy, B.W. and Scheufele, D.A. 135, 145, 149, 194
 Hardy, B.W. *et al.* 8, 425, 428
 Hargadon, A. and Douglas, Y. 100
 Hargittai, E. 191, 297
 Hargittai, E. and Shafer, S. 182
 Hargreaves, I. and Thomas, J. 202
 Harmel, R. and Janda, K. 62
 Harper, C. 136
 Harraway, D. 262–63
 Harris Interactive 346
 Harrison, T. and Falvey, L. 144
 Hart, R.P. 233, 235, 237
 Hartley, J. 217
 Haufler, V. 403
 Havick, J. 187
 Hawk, B., Rieder, D.M. and Oviedo, O. 383
 Hayden, C. and Ball-Rokeach, S.J. 280, 286, 287
 HDI (Human Development Index) 47, 49, 52, 428
 Healy, A. and McNamara, D. 175
 Hechter, M. and Okamoto, D. 283
 Heckscher, C.C. and Donellon, A. 73, 81
 Heeks, R. and Bailur, S. 102
 Heileman, R. 66
 Heinz, J.P. 78
 Heller, M. 362
 Herbsleb, J.D. *et al.* 411
 Herbst, S. 233
 Herman, B. and Gandy, O. 349
 Herring, S.C. 261–62
 Herring, S.C. *et al.* 237, 262
 Hersch, Seymour 228
 Hersh, S. 220
 Heydermann, S. 314
 Hick, S.F. and McNutt, J.G. 423
 Hickson, D. *et al.* 76
 hierarchies, flattening of 31
 Hill, K.A. and Hughes, J.E. 234, 235, 276
 Hiller, H.H. and Franz, T.M. 284
 Hindman, M. 5, 60, 68
 Hirji, F. 277
 HM Revenue and Customs 121
 Ho, K.C. *et al.* 41
 Hobolt, S.B. 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 163, 169, 172
 Hodkinson, S. 29
 Hoff, J. 88
 Hoff, J. *et al.* 38, 39
 Hoffman, A. 100
 Hoffman, D.L. *et al.* 178
 Hoffman, L.H. 136, 141, 189, 198
 Holbrook, T.M. 135
 Holmes, D. 275
 Hood, C. and Margetts, H. 127
 Hood, C. *et al.* 122
 Hoogvelt, A. 282

- Hopkins, H. 206
 Hopkins, K. and Matheson, D.M. 198
 Horrigan, J. 146, 178, 179
 Horrigan, J. and Rainie, L. 190, 300
 Horrigan, J. *et al.* 170
 Houston, F. 188
 Howard, Philip N. 1–9, 15, 18, 40, 44, 53, 55, 61, 69, 145, 148, 152, 154, 243, 383n1, 424–34, xiii
 Howard, P.N. *et al.* 154, 181, 276, 277, 299
 Howes, M. 277
 Huang, Z. 110
 Huckfeldt, R. and Sprague, J. 145, 150
 Huckfeldt, R., Johnson, P.E. and Sprague, J. 149, 155
 Hug, Simon 172
 Hughes, D.M. 266
 human development 49, 52; HDI (Human Development Index) 47, 49, 52, 428
 Human Rights Watch 335
 Hume, E. 189
 Hunter, D. 351, 362
 Huntington, Samuel 227
 Hussein, Saddam 226
 Hutton Enquiry 222
 hybrid influence, public spaces online 242–43
 hybrid internet use 278, 282
 hyper-modernism 115–16
 hypertext: hyperlinks as binding ties 355–57; in online news 189, 193
- i2 Inc 340
 ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Numbers) 383n2, 386–87, 391, 396, 397, 403, 404–5, 406, 412–13
 ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) 384, 386, 394; bureaucratic reform and e-government in US 99, 100, 101–2, 105; electoral web production practices 41–42; European political organizations 25–26, 32, 33; gender, internet and theorizing on 269, 270, 271; ICT4D (ICT for Development) 386, 387, 393; parliamentary democracy, visibility of 87–88, 91
 identity: gender as 261–65, 273; narratives and network dynamics 250–54, 258; negotiation of, new immigrants and 276
 IGF (Internet Governance Forum) 387, 390, 392, 393, 394, 395, 398, 399, 405, 408, 412
 Imfeld, C. and Scott, G.W. 188
 immigration: policies of host society 285; reasons for and internet use 283–84; *see also* new immigrants and civic society
 incentivization 118–19
 inclusion, policy areas for 302–3
 inclusion filtering 325
 inclusiveness in social activism 252–53
 independence of audiences of online news 187
 indirect engagement 145
 indirect representation 94–95
 individual-level influences: analysis of 152–54; measures of 152; results of analysis 152–54
Indymedia: public spaces online 240; Web 2.0 205
 information: access to online 234–35, 236; democratization of 197–98, 199; in electoral web production 42–43, 46; role in democratic society 134–35
 information and direct democracy 157–72; AR (“argument repertoire”) 170; ballot measures, knowledge of 168–69, 171; ballot measures, online news consumption and 169; candidate elections and direct democracy 161–62; case studies 163–67; choices, complexity facing voters 161–62; deliberative impact of internet 159, 169–70; direct democracy, mechanisms of 159–60; direct democracy, problems and prospects for 160–63, 171–72; direct democracy processes 157–58; direct democratic contexts, variation within 162–63; endorsements, knowledge of 169; European direct democracy 160; European referendums and online politics 166–67; further reading guide 172; informational impact of internet 159, 168–71; Initiative and Referendum Institute, USC 165, 172; internet and direct democracy 167–71, 172; organizational impact of internet 159, 171; presidential election 2004, direct democracy and internet use 165–66; US direct democracy 159–60; Washington State, state-wide initiatives 163–65; world stage, direct democracy and 158
 information flow: acceleration of 222–23, 228; expansion of 221–22, 228
 information literacy 181–82
 information networks in social activism 246–47
Information Polity 98
 information richness 145–49, 154
 information society: for all in Europe 302–3; information capitalism and 375
 information tracking 96–97
 infrastructure: change in locational surveillance 346; of internet 324–26
 Ingber, S. 352
 Inglehart, R. and Welzel, C. 237, 240, 245
 Initiative and Referendum Institute, USC 165, 172
 INPHO (Information Network for Public Health Officials) 104
 institutions: bureaucratic reform and e-government in US 100–101; institutional engagement 80–81; institutional research dimensions 111–12; relationship between 58–59; secrecy of, democratic visibility and 86–87
 Institutions of American Democracy (Annenberg Democracy Project) 143
 Intel Corp. 360
Intel Corp. v. Hamidi (2003) 354

- inter-rater reliability 45–46
- interaction: interactive news 190; mediation and 422; technological change and political organization 79–80
- interactivity: digital division in Europe 300; rise of 223
- interest group mobilization 77–78
- internal democracy 27
- internal perspectives, property in cyberspace 354–55
- International Organization* 414
- international regimes, knowledge and networks 402–3
- International Telecommunication Union 47, 49, 52, 56, 387, 427
- internet: as activist tool 29–30; advent and popularization of 13; affordances of 83–84; café users in Arab world 309, 316–19; campaigning, history of 14; connections, beneath the surface of 324–26; consultation on Parliament's use of 91–94; contextual factors in internet use 285–86; contingent model, immigrants' use for civic engagement 277–82; deliberative impact of internet 159, 169–70; democratic benefits of internet use 174–75; democratic institutions and internet policy 421–22; as democratic tool 31; diffusion in context 306–10, 319; and direct democracy 167–71, 172; dynamics of 82–83; education and use of 283; election campaigns, catalysts and anti-catalysts for 62–70; filtering of 335–36n4; flexibility of 82–83; gender and use of 283; generation and use of 284; governance of 397–98, 403–5; governance of, phases of 390–93; hubs and online news 192, 197; individual-level factors in use of 283–85, 286; informational impact of 159, 168–71; infrastructure of 324–26; integration of content, role in 431; interaction and engagement 82–84; and meanings, top-down approach 311–14; motivation for internet connection 289–91, 302–3; as outsiders' medium 32–33; passivity and 30; as platform for political discourse 4–5; policy-making, changing politics of 384–86, 397–98; political disparities, internet and magnification of 176–77; as recruitment tool 28–29; religion and use of 284; replication of content, role in 431; security companies 331; societal uses 102–3; top-down approach to 311–14, 319; use and constructions of meaning 314–19; young, promise of engagement of 175
- Internet and Elections Project: electoral web production practices 42, 44–45, 45–54; parties and election campaigns 57
- Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) 383n2, 386–87, 391, 396, 397, 403, 404–5, 406, 412–13
- Internet Engineering Taskforce 377, 378, 382, 390
- Internet Governance Project 409
- Internet Society 377, 382, 390
- Internet Systems Consortium 136
- Internet World Stats 306, 307, 417
- interorganizational change in Europe 32–34, 38
- intraorganizational change in Europe 28–31, 37–38
- Introna, L. and Nissenbaum, H. 379
- involvement: electoral web production and 43, 46–47; in politics and government online 175–77, 183–84
- IPRs (Intellectual Property Rights) 364–68, 370–71, 373–75, 394
- Iran 314
- Iraq 307, 308
- IRC (“internet relay chat”) 263
- Irigary, Luce 263
- IXPs (internet exchange points) 324
- Iyengar, S. 148, 155
- Jackson, B. and Jamison, K. 132
- Jackson, Brooks 143
- Jackson, N. 61
- Jacobs, L.R. and Skocpol, T. 184
- Jacobs, N. 374, 375
- Jaffe, J.M. *et al.* 262
- Jalonick, M.C. 22
- Jamieson, K. and Hardy, B. 132, 133, 136, 137, 142
- Jamieson, K. and Waldman, P. 132, 136
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall 131–43, 143, xiii
- Jamieson, K.H. *et al.* 143
- Janda, K. 63, 71
- Jankowski, Nicholas W. 40–55, xiii
- Jankowski, N.W. and van Selm, M. 235
- Janssen, D. and Kies, R. 170
- Jefferson, Thomas 133
- Jenkins, G.S. 17
- Jennings, M.K. and Zeitner, V. 77, 135
- Jensen, J.L. 170, 239
- Jensen, M.J. *et al.* 240
- Johnson, P.E. 80
- Johnson, T.J. and Kaye, B.K. 136, 137, 190, 191, 231, 276, 277
- Johnson, T.J. *et al.* 192
- Johnston, P. 342
- Johnston, R., Hagen, M.G. and Jamieson, K.H. 135
- Jones, B.D. 177
- Jones, B.D. and Baumgartner, F.R. 177
- Jones, S.G. 234, 235
- Jones-Correa, M. 283
- Jordan 306, 307, 308, 311, 312, 314; internet café, observation from 317–18; REACH initiative in 314
- Jordan, A.G. 27
- Jordan, A.G. and Mahoney, W.A. 27, 30
- Jordan, Eason 229
- Jordan, T. 30
- Jordan, T. and Taylor, P. 354
- Jordan Times* 314

- Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 287
Journal of Industrial Relations 39
Journal of Legislative Studies 98
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 117
 Journalism, Project for Excellence in 202–11, 213
 Juels, A. 340
 Jung, J.-Y. *et al.* 181, 284, 286, 287
- Kaestle, D.F. *et al.* 182
 Kahin, B. and Keller, J. 376
 Kahn, R. and Kellner, D. 33, 75
 Kaid, L.L. 19, 135, 136, 234
 Kain, J. 180
 Kalathil, S. and Boas, T.C. 75, 229, 305, 335, 416, 423
 Kaldor, M. 252
 Kaldor-Robinson, J. 281
 Kamalipour, Y. 40
 Kamm, Oliver 226
 Kane, T. 305
 Kasarda, J.D. 180
 Katz, E. 147, 150, 187, 196
 Katz, J.E. and Aspden, P. 276, 277
 Katz, J.E. and Rice, R.E. 145, 146, 155, 178, 181, 184, 290
 Katz, J.E. *et al.* 276, 277
 Kaufmann, J. 403
 Kavanagh, D. 59
 Kavanaugh, A.L. and Patterson, S.J. 277
 Kaye, B.K. and Johnson, T.J. 191
 Kaye, K. 20
 Kaylor, C. *et al.* 110
 Kearney, J.D. and Merrill, T. 353
 Keck, M. and Sikkink, K. 246, 259
 Kelly, R. 68
 Kendall, L. 262
 Kenix, L. 240
 Kennedy, John F. 220
 Kensinger, L. 267
 Kenski, K. and Jamieson, K.H. 135, 140, 142
 Keohane, R. 402, 413
 Keohane, R. and Nye, J. 402
 Kerbel, M.R. and Bloom, J.D. 237
 Kerr, O.S. 270, 354–55
 Kerry, John 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 60, 132, 133, 134, 138, 139
 Key, V.O. 62
 Kibby, M. 266
 Kibby, M. and Costello, B. 266
 Kidd, D. 254
 Kim, J. *et al.* 147
 Kim, J.Y. 170
 Kim, M.Y. *et al.* 276
 Kim, Y.-C. and Ball-Rokeach, S.J. 276, 280, 281, 285
 Kim, Y.-C. *et al.* 77, 277, 284, 287
- Kim, Y.M. 197, 199
 Kim, Yong-Chan 9, 275–87, 426, xiv
 Kimber, R. 61
 Kinder, D.R. 151
 Kiouisis, S. 189
 Kirchner, H. 306
 Kirsch, I.S. *et al.* 182
 Kitschelt, H. 35
 Klapper, J.T. 422
 Klein, H. 404
 Kleiner, A. and Lewis, L. 182
 Kling, R. 231
 Klingemann, H.-D. 26
 Klotz, R.J. 59, 69
 Kluver, R. and Banerjee, I. 41
 Kluver, R. *et al.* 24, 39, 40, 41, 71
 Kluver, Randolph 40–55, 418, xiv
 Knobloch, S. *et al.* 199
 Knobloch-Westerwick, S. *et al.* 191
 knowledge: of ballot measures 168–69, 171; of endorsements 169; gap hypothesis 146; international regimes, knowledge and networks 402–3; technical knowledge 415–16
 Kobayashi, T. *et al.* 235
 Kohut, A. 239, 277
 Koollaas, R. 245
 Koster, M. 378–79, 383n5
 Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project 400n8
 Kraemer, K. and King, J. 116, 117, 127
 Kraemer, K. and Kling, R. 116
 Kranich, N. 390
 Kranzberg, Melvin 230–31
 Krasner, S.D. 402, 414
 Kraut, R. *et al.* 276, 277
 Krebs, K. 421
 Kreimer, S.F. 354
 Kretschmer, S. and Carveth, R. 179
 Kriesi, H. *et al.* 27, 35
 Kroløkke, C.H. 267
 Krosnick, J.A. 196, 197
 Krueger, B.S. 175
 Kulikova, S.V. and Perlmutter, D.D. 240
 Kush, C. 24
 Kuwait 306, 307, 308
 Kwak, N. *et al.* 147
 Kyllonen, P. and Chrystal, R. 175
- LA Times* 207
 labor law and workplace regulation 344–45
 Lacharite, J. 335
 Laegran, A.S. 270, 274
 Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 351
 Lamont, Ned 19, 21, 22, 60, 65, 66
 Lander, M. 422
 Landes, William 359
 Landes, W.M. and Posner, R.A. 350

- Lane, F. 265
 Lane, G. and Thelwall, S. 347
 Langlois, Ganaele 383n1
 Langman, L. 240
 Lappin, T. 344
 LaRose, R. and Eastin, M.S. 191
 Lasch, C. 230, 231, 237, 238
 Latinos, language and education problems of 180–81
 Latour, B. 250, 270, 377
Launching into Cyberspace (Franda, M.) 320
 Lawson-Borders, G. and Kirk, R. 188, 194
 Lazer, D. and Mayer-Schönberger, V. 113
 Leadbeater, C. and Mulgan, G. 32
 Leake, C. 340
 learning effects: experiment-based studies 192–93; survey-based studies 192
 Lebanon 306, 307, 308
 Lebert, J. 33, 34
 Leblebici, H. *et al.* 100
 LeDuc, L. 160, 162, 172
 Lee, E. 29
 legislative process, digital media and 88
 Leib, E.J. 161
 Leiner, B.M. *et al.* 384, 391
 Lemley, M.A. 362
 Lenhart, A. 181
 Lenhart, A. and Fox, S. 212
 Lerner, D. 422
 Lessig, L. 236, 362, 380
 Leston-Bandeira, C. 88
 Levitt, Steven 359
 Lewin, K. 402
 Lewinsky, Monica 228
 Lewis, H. 335
 Li, C. 327, 335
 Li, Q. 262
 Li, X. 189, 201, 213
 Libicki, M.C. 335
 Libya 307, 308
 Lieberman, Joseph 5, 21, 60
Life on the Screen (Turkle, S.) 263
 Liff, S. 399n1
 Lijphart, A. 62
 like-mindedness, unity in 149–52, 154–55
 Lillie, J.J.M. 265, 266
 Lim, J. 188
 Lin, N. 77, 276
 Lincoln-Douglas 243
 LINUX 372, 374
 Lippmann, W. 186, 219
 Lipton, J. 354
 Lizza, R. 18, 22
 Lloyd, J. 226
 local and state e-government 109–11
 local websites 204
 localization filtering 329
 locational surveillance 337–48; closed circuit TV systems 339; control and normalization of 347; convergence 340–41; data protection in EU 342–43, 346; emergency response system (ERS) 337–39; further reading guide 348; infrastructural change in 346; labor law and workplace regulation 344–45; location-based services 337–39; maps, access to 345; mobile phones 337–39; privacy law in US 343–44; privacy paradigm, dominance of 346; radio frequency identification (RFID) 339–40, 347; regulatory responses 346–47; security paradigm, dominance of 346; social activities “contextual integrity” of 347; social movements 345–46; surveillance, structuring order of 341–46; surveillance and control in public management 116; techniques and practices of 337–41; Urban tapestries project 347; workplace regulation 344–45
 Locke, John 350–51
 London, S. 152
 Long, N.E. 399
 long tail, theory of 4–5
Los Angeles Times 20
 Lott, Trent 194, 229
 Loughlan, P. 354
 Lowrey, W. 194
 Lowrey, W. and Anderson, W. 188, 210, 211, 212, 213
 Lowry, R. 18
 Lula da Silva, Luiz Inacio 418, 422
 Lupia, A. 158, 159, 161
 Lupia, A. and Matsusaka, J.G. 158, 160
 Lupia, A. and McCubbins, M.D. 134
 Lupia, L. and Sin, G. 76, 85
 Luskin, R.C. *et al.* 170
 Lusoli, W. and Ward, S.J. 29, 30, 39
 Lynch, M. 188, 309–10
 Lyon, D. 347
 Lyotard, J.F. 233
 MacAskill, E. 66
 McCain, John 16, 18, 19, 21, 59, 65, 66, 229
 McCain-Feingold Finance Reform Act (2002) 67–68
 McCarthy, J. and Zald, M. 253
 McCaskill, Claire 22
 McCaughey, M. and Ayers, M.D. 39, 75
 McChesney, R. 208, 213, 236, 242, 243
 McCombs, M.E. *et al.* 147
 McFarland, A. 184
 McFerrin, R. and Wills, D. 349
 McGowan, D. 351, 352, 354
 MacGregor, P. 209, 212
 Macintosh, A. *et al.* 88
 McKay, D. 65
 MacKenzie, A. 383
 MacKinnon, Catherine 266

- MacLean, D. 406
 McLeod, J.M. and McDonald, D.G. 146
 McLeod, J.M. *et al.* 147
 McNair, Brian 9, 217–29, 219, 220, 266, 424, xiv
 Madden, M. 202
 Madison, M.J. 349
 Magid, L. 339, 340
 Maguire, S. *et al.* 100
 Mahmud, Abdul-Moneim 314
 Mair, P. and Von Biezen, I. 26
 Malbin, M.J. and Cain, C.A. 66
 male domination 262
 Malina, A. 234
 Maltby, S. and Keeble, R. 229
 Manjoo, F. 17
 Manovich, L. 189
 maps, access to 345
 Marcella, R. *et al.* 239
 March, J.G. and Olsen, J.P. 57
 March, L. 35
 Margetts, H. and Yared, H. 125
 Margetts, Helen 8, 27, 114–27, 425, xiv
 Margolis, M. and Resnick, D. 7, 24, 34, 38, 58, 71, 135, 236
 Margolis, M. *et al.* 236
 Margolis, M., Resnick, D. and Levy, J. 13
 Margulis, S. 362
 market leaders on Web 2.0 205–8
 Martin, C.H. and Stronach, B. 42
 Marvin, C. 231
 Marwell, G. and Oliver, P. 85, 254
 mass participation, rise of 223
 Massey, B.L. and Luo, W. 189
 Massey, D.S. and Denton, N.A. 180
 Matei, S. and Ball-Rokeach, S.J. 276, 277, 280, 286, 287
 material and physical access 291–94
 Matsusaka, J.G. 158, 160, 161, 172
 maturation, election campaigns in US 15–19
 May, C. and Sell, S. 366, 367, 375
 May, Christopher 9, 364–75, 426, xiv
 Mayo, E. and Steinberg, T. 90
 Mayor's Advisory Council, Chicago 183
 media-controlled online communication 19–21
 media sectors, Web 2.0 and convergence of 204
 MeetUp 73, 81, 83
 Melucci, A. 85, 246, 253, 259
 Menjívar, C. 284
 Merrill, J.C. and Lowenstein, R.L. 187, 195, 196
 Metamorphosis Project (USC) 280, 428
 metaphor: dominance and distortion through 352–53; strategic use of 353; as twin-edged sword 351–52
Metaphors We Live By (Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M.) 351
 Meyer, J.W. and Rowan, B. 100
 MFN (“most-favored nation”) treatment 366
 MGM *v. Grokster* (2005) 359–61, 361–62
Miami Herald 207
 michelinmedia.com 340
 Michels, R. 28, 397
Middle East Journal 320
 MIIS (Multi-level Integrated Information System) 101
 Milbank, D. and Van de Hei, J. 132
 Miliband, David 61
 Mill, J.S. 145, 155
 Miller, T. 108, 245
 Miller, W.E. and Shanks, J.M. 144
 Milner, H.V. 422
 Milton, Daniel 9, 415–23, 425, xiv
 minorities and technology 179–80
MissyUSA.com 279
 Mitra, A. 235, 279, 287
 Mobbs, P. 33
 mobile phones 337–39
 mobilization: election campaigns in US 17–18; in electoral web production 43, 48–49; online 241; tactics of elites 154–55
 Modernization, House of Commons Select Committee on 91
 Monge, P.R. and Contractor, N.S. 81
 Monge, P.R. *et al.* 85
 Monge P.R. and Fulk, J. 73
 Moody, G. 374, 375
 Moon, M. 117
 MORI 61
 Morley, D. and Robins, K. 275, 286
 Morocco 306, 307, 308
 Morris, D. 13, 24, 32, 59, 71
 Morris, Jonathan S. 13–24, xiv
 Mosquera, M. 422
 Mossberger, K. *et al.* 77, 173, 174, 175, 176, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 184, 304
 Mossberger, Karen 8, 173–85, 425, xiv
 Mouffe, C. 233, 241
 MoveOn 7, 60–61, 68, 69, 250
 Moy, P. *et al.* 135, 234
 Moynihan, Daniel Patrick 133
 MpURL Membersnet 61, 63, 64, 69
 MSNBC 203, 206, 209
 Mubarak, Hosni 310, 311–12
Much More Could Have Been Achieved (WSIS Civil Society) 387
 MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) 262, 263
 Mueller, M. 376–77, 403, 414
 Mulgan, G. 26
 multi-stakeholder: approach of WSIS, success or failure? 388–90, 398; origins of WSIS 387–88; participation, enablement of 410–13; perspective, implications of 393–94
 multiaxial information environment 148
 multidisciplinary, need for 261
 municipal broadband, potential for 182–83

- Murdoch, Rupert 225
 Murphy, E. 320
 Murray, S. 60
 Mutz, D.C. 155
 Mutz, D.C. and Martin, P.S. 150
 Myers, D. 276, 278
 MySociety 90–91
 MySpace.com 5, 21; gender, internet and theorizing on 270, 271, 272; global media environment 221, 223; parties and election campaigns 61; public spaces online 242; technological change and political organization 73, 81; Web 2.0 202
- Naficy, H. 282
 Nagel, J. 73
 Nahapiet, J. and Ghoshal, S. 100
 Napoli, P.M. 352–53
The Culture of Narcissism (Lasch, C.) 237
 narratives: and frames as analytical constructs 248–49, 259; identities and technology networks 254–58, 258–59; identity and network dynamics 250–54, 258; public and private opinion, narratives of 231–32
 narrowband *versus* broadband 299–300
 NASCIO (National Association of State Chief Information Officers) 109, 110
 Nash, Victoria 399n1
 National Academy of Science Report (1993) 414
 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES, 2004) 131, 132, 133, 137–42, 427; statistical analysis and results 139–42
 National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO) 109–10
 national developments, comparison of 49–50
 national differences, explanations for 56–58
 National Performance Review (Clinton–Gore) 103, 119
 National Republican Senatorial Committee 61
 National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) 177–78, 180, 182, 303
 National Venture Capitalist Association (NVCA) 360
 Naughton, J. 224
 Nazif, Ahmad 312
 Nee, V. and Ingram, P. 101
 needs-based holism 122–23
 Negrine, R. and Papanthassopoulos, S. 59
 Negroponce, N. 187, 203, 231, 373
 Nelson, Ted 380
 Netscape Mosaic 221
Netville digital neighborhood 279
 network: attacks, blocking by 333–34, 334–35; composition 247, 258–59; simplification 122
 Neu, C.R. *et al.* 178
 Neundorff, K.A. 45
 Neuman, S.B. and Celano, D. 416
 Neuman, W.R. 146, 155
 Neuman, W.R., McKnight, L. and Solomon, R. 421
 Neustadt, R.E. 136
 new immigrants and civic society 275–87; *Al-Jazeera TV* 285; *Anrang TV* 286; assimilation internet use, connecting to “here” 278, 279–80; civic engagement and internet use 276–77, 286; civic engagement relationship, internet use type and 282–86; class and internet use 283; communication environment 285–86; Community Technology Centers 280; connectedness and internet use 284–85; contextual factors in internet use 285–86; contingent model, immigrants’ use of internet for civic engagement 277–82; education and internet use 283; emigrant policies of home countries 285; further reading guide 286–87; gender and internet use 283; generation and internet use 284; host society, political environment of 285; hybrid internet use 278, 282; identity, negotiation of 276; immigration, reasons for and internet use 283–84; immigration policies of host society 285; individual-level factors in internet use 283–85, 286; Metamorphosis Project (USC) 280; *MissyUSA.com* 279; *Netville* digital neighborhood 279; PALESA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Abroad) 281; religion and internet use 284; residence duration and internet use 284; socio-economic differences 285; *Telemundo* 286; transnational internet use, connecting to “there” 278, 280–81; typology of immigrant internet usage 282–86; virtual internet use 278, 281–82
 New Media Index 47, 51, 52
The New Media Reader (Wardrip-Fruin, N. and Montfort, N.) 383
The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility (Haggerty, K.D. and Ericson, R.V., Eds.) 348
New York Times 137, 150, 191, 192, 194, 207, 209, 238
 Newell, J. 57
 Newhagen, J.E. and Rafaeli, S. 236
 news: consumption of, political effects of 195–98; media use, political engagement online 145–47; niche news providers 204–5, 212; reconfiguration of news markets 203–5, 212–13; and Web 2.0 202–3
 Nie, N.H. 135
 Nie, N.H. and Erbring, L. 30, 135, 178, 277
 Nielsen/NetRatings 210
 Nissenbaum, H. 347, 354
 Nixon, P.G. *et al.* 39n2
 Noam, E.M. 243
 Noguchi, Y. 22
 Nohria, N. and Berkley, J.D. 81
 NOI 60, 69

- Nokia 341
- Noland, M. 305
- non-hierarchical networks 76–77
- normalization: European political organizations 33–34; normalizers and optimists, debate between 58–59
- Norris, C. and Armstrong, G. 348
- Norris, D.F. and Moon, M.J. 111, 117, 127, 174
- Norris, P. 26, 29, 34, 35, 41, 42, 43, 49, 55, 144, 145, 151, 184, 190, 277, 415, 423, 432
- Northwest Social Forum (NWSF) 248, 256–58
- Norton, A.R. 310, 315, 319
- Norton, P. 88, 98
- NPM (New Public Management) reforms 114, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 126
- NPR (National Performance Review) 103–4
- NRA (National Rifle Association) 81
- Nye, J.S. and Owens, W.A. 335
- Oates, S. *et al.* 39
- Obama, Barack 22, 23, 61, 64, 65, 66
- Oberschall, A. 72
- O'Brien, J. 264
- OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) 179
- offline political discussion, assessment of 155–56n2
- Oliver, M. 340, 346
- Olivers, D. 256
- O'Loughlin, B. 236
- Olson, M. 73, 74–75, 79, 85
- Olson, M. and Zeckhauser, R. 74
- Oman 306, 307, 308
- OMB (Office of Management and Budget) 106, 107–8
- one-stop provision 123
- online: civic association 73–74; consultations 92–94; environment, complexity of 226; involvement in politics and government online 175–77, 183–84; non-events in Britain 61–62; success in US 59–61
- online news 186–200; agenda building and setting 194; aggregators 205; audience use 190–92; content of 189; creation of 188–89; design of 189–90; effects of reading 192–95; form and content 187–90; fragmentation 196, 199; further reading guide 199–200; future research, ideas for 198–99; getting news online 190–91; hypertext 189, 193; independence of audiences 187; information democratization 197–98, 199; interactive news 190; internet hubs 192, 197; investigation, need for more 198–99; issue agendas, development of 194; learning effects, experiment-based studies 192–93; learning effects, survey-based studies 192; news consumption, political effects of 195–98; polarization 196–97, 199; psychology of learning online 193; reading news online 191–92; segmentation 196, 199; segmentation of audiences 187; specialization 195–96, 199
- open-source news 212
- open source software in Africa 370–73
- openness, globalizing the logic of 364–75; bounded openness 373–74; Copyright Act (US, 1980) 367; Digital Millennium Copyright Act (US, DMCA) 368; digital technologies and intellectual property 368–70; DRM (“digital rights management”) 368, 369, 371, 374; FOSS (“free and open-source software”) 370, 371–73; further reading guide 375; global governance of intellectual property 365–68; GPL (General Public License) 369–70; information society, information capitalism and 375; IPRs (Intellectual Property Rights) 364–68, 370–71, 373–75, 394; LINUX 372, 374; MFN (“most-favored nation”) treatment 366; open source software in Africa 370–73; TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement 365–67, 371; UNESCO 371; WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) 366, 367; WTO (World Trade Organization) 366–67, 371
- OpenNet Initiative (ONI) 323–24, 326, 327, 329, 333, 335, 335n2, 428
- OpenStreetMap 345
- O'Reilly, Tim 4, 6, 9n1
- organization: capacity for, European political organizations 36; of membership of parties 63–65, 70; organizational fecundity 73, 74–78, 84; organizing and 78–79; structures of 73, 76–77
- organizations: impact of internet on 159, 171; incentives for European political organizations 36–37; links between, strengthening of 30; organizational reach, extension of 28–29
- Ortony, A. 362
- Ostergaard-Nielsen, E. 280, 283, 285, 286, 287
- Ostrom, E. 402
- O'Toole, L. 266, 274
- Overholser, Geneva 143
- Oye, K.A. 402
- Paasonen, S. 266
- Paasonen, S. *et al.* 266
- Padovani, C. and Tuzzi, A. 389
- Page, B.I. 170
- PALESA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Abroad) 281
- Palestine 307, 308
- Palfrey, John G. 335n2
- Palser, B. 189
- Papacharissi, Zizi 9, 230–45, 426, xiv
- Parasuraman, A. and Zinkhan, G.M. 265
- Pare, D. 377
- Park, H.W. 296, 299
- Park, H.W. *et al.* 55

- Parliamentary Affairs* 98
- parliamentary democracy, visibility of 86–98;
Connecting Parliament with the Public (House of Commons Select Committee on Modernization) 91; deference 95–96; demand-based online operations 90; digitally enables Parliamentary communications 96–97; direct democracy 94–95; EPG (Electronic Publishing Group) 88–89; further reading guide 98; *Hansard* 88, 89, 90; Hansard Society 92; ICTs 87–88, 91; indirect representation 94–95; information tracking 96–97; institutional secrecy, democratic visibility and 86–87; internet, consultation on Parliament's use of 91–94; legislative process, digital media and 88; Modernization, House of Commons Select Committee on 91; MySociety 90–91; online consultations 92–94; Parliament, visibility to public of 88–91, 97–98; public, Parliamentary visibility of 91–94, 98; public communication, tracking flow of 97; public distrust of Parliament 86–87; Putnam Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy 91; representation, concept of 96; representation, speaking for 94–97, 98; representative government 94–95; social networking 90; TheyWorkForYou 90; visibility, digital technologies and 87–88
- participation: civil society and politics of 396–97, 398; decline in levels of 26–27; enablement of? 405–6
- Participation Index 47, 50, 52
- parties and election campaigns 56–71; Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act (2002) 67; campaign finance 66–68, 70; candidate recruitment and selection 65–66; communication environment 68–70; Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act (1883) 68; Facebook 61; Federal Election Campaign Act (1971) 67; Federal Election Commission 67; further reading guide 71; institutions, relationship between 58–59; Internet and Elections Project 57; internet election campaigns, catalysts and anti-catalysts for 62–70; MpURL Membersnet 61, 63, 64, 69; MySpace 61; national differences, explanations for 56–58; normalizers and optimists, debate between 58–59; online non-events in Britain 61–62; online success in United States 59–61; optimists and normalizers, debate between 58–59; organization of membership 63–65, 70; party-controlled TV 69; party organization and electoral environment 62–70; Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act (PPERA, 2000) 68; representative democracy optimism 59; separation of powers 63; sociological determinism 58; systemic institutional pluralism 62–63, 70; technological determinism 58, 59; UK Election Commission 67; United States and Britain, comparisons between 70–71; Web 2.0 65; Webcameron.org 61, 70
- The Passing of Traditional Society* (Lerner, D.) 422
- passivity, internet and 30
- Paterson, C. 208, 209, 212
- Patterson, T.E. 132, 136, 142, 233, 237
- Patterson, T.E. and Seib, P. 133
- Pavlik, J.V. 188, 210, 213, 234
- Pederson, K. and Saglie, J. 39
- Peltu, Malcolm 9, 384–400, 425, xiv
- Peng, F.Y. *et al.* 136
- Penn, I. 340
- Pentland, B. and Feldman, M. 247, 260
- Pepys, Samuel 220
- Perelman, M. 375
- Peretti, J. 253
- Perloff, R.M. 190
- Pew Internet and American Life Project 165, 166, 169, 171, 174, 176, 178, 179, 180, 181, 185, 213, 427, 434n2
- Pew Research Center 22, 194, 202, 211
- Pew Research Center for People and Press 131, 192
- Pharr, S.J. and Putnam, R.D. 26
- Phillips, David J. 9, 66, 337–48, 426, xiv
- Pianta, M. 253
- Pianta, M. and Silva, F. 253
- Pickard, V.W. 240
- Pickerill, J. 27, 30, 31, 33, 34, 39
- Pinochet, Augusto 170
- Piott, S.L. 160
- Pitkin, Hannah 96
- place blogs 204
- Plant, S. 263
- Pleyers, G. 256
- pluralistic agonism 239–41
- Podlas, K. 267
- Poindexter, P.M. *et al.* 140
- polarization of online news 196–97, 199
- Polat, R.K. 168, 169
- Political Campaigning in Referendums* (de Vreese, C. and Semetko, H.) 172
- political culture 44, 50, 51–52, 54
- political development 43–44, 47, 49–50, 52, 54
- political discussion 147; online, assessment of 155–56n2
- political economy and transformation of cyberspace 350
- political engagement online 144–56; demos, democratic process and judgements of the 144; digital divide, potential for widening of 144–45; discussion forums online 149–50; elite demagoguery 154; further reading guide 155; indirect engagement 145; individual-level influences, analysis of 152–54; individual-level influences, measures of 152; individual-level influences, results of analysis 152–54; information

- richness 145–49, 154; knowledge gap hypothesis 146; like-mindedness, unity in 149–52, 154–55; mobilization tactics of elites 154–55; multi-axial information environment 148; news media use 145–47; political discussion 147; political participation 147–49; public and private spheres, porous boundaries between 151–52, 154; reinvigoration of, internet and 144; selective exposure 150–51, 152; social boundaries, weakening of 151–52; sophistication and “enlarged mentality” 145; subtlety in engagement 145
- political factors in digital divide 416
- political participation: online 147–49; and organizational change in Europe 26–28, 37–38
- Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act (PPERA, 2000) 68
- political potential of online news media 231
- political practices and cultures 41, 53–54
- political uses of digital media 239–40
- politics: and government online, growth and impact of 174–75, 183–84; and internet in global media environment 225, 228–29; reinvigoration of, internet and 144; as usual in European political organizations 33–34
- Politics and Technology* (Street, J.) 423
- Politics as Usual* (Margolis, M. and Resnick, D.) 58
- The Politics of Direct Democracy* (LeDuc, L.) 172
- politics of protocols 376–83; ARPANET 376, 384; commanding a standard 378–79; further reading guide 383; Google 377–78, 379; Google’s symbiotic business model 380–82, 382–83; Internet Engineering Taskforce 377, 378, 382, 390; Internet Society 377, 382; protocol, voluntary nature of 382; robots.txt exclusion commands 377, 378, 379–80; site maps 380–82; techno-governamentality 376; W3 (World Wide Web Consortium) 377, 401; Webcrawler (AOL) 378; White House robots.txt files 379–80, 382
- Politics of Small Things* (Goldfarb, J.C.) 315–16
- politics of the internet, multi-stakeholder policy making 384–400; civil society and politics of participation 396–97, 398; civil society as key stakeholder in WSIS 387–90; classification of internet governance issues 395–96; dynamics of multi-stakeholder decision-making 395–97; further reading guide 399; governance challenge of WSIS 385–86; internet governance, comparison of traditional and WSIS processes 391; internet governance, phases of 390–93; internet governance and WSIS 390–93, 397–98; internet policy-making, changing politics of 384–86, 397–98; multi-stakeholder approach of WSIS, success or failure? 388–90, 398; multi-stakeholder origins of WSIS 387–88; multi-stakeholder perspective, implications of 393–94; participation, civil society and politics of 396–97, 398; policy-making paradigm, WSIS as exemplar of? 386–87, 398; social research, information society and 398–99; special influence manipulation, insulation against 393; World Summit on the Information Society 399n1, 428; WSIS, case study 386–87
- Polletta, F. 251, 259
- Pollit, C. 120
- Pollitt, C. and Boukhaert, G. 117
- Polyarchy Dataset 55n6
- Popkin, Samuel L. 134
- Pomocopia* (O’Toole, L.) 274
- pornography 265–66
- Porter, D. 144
- Portes, A. and Sensenbrenner, J. 280
- Portes, A. and Zhou, M. 283
- Post, D. and Johnson, D.R. 351
- Postel, Jon 391
- Postelnicu, M. *et al.* 17, 18
- Poster, M. 235, 273
- postmodern society and public sphere 233, 237
- Potter, W.J. and Levine-Donnerstein, D. 45
- poverty and segregation 180
- Powell, W. 81
- The Power of Nightmares* (Adam Curtis documentary) 227
- PQMedia 19
- Preece, J. 276
- presence awareness 411
- President, US Executive Office of the 105–6; President’s Management Agenda 105–6, 108
- presidential campaign, 2004 US 131–43; direct democracy and internet use 165–66
- press: fact and fiction 132; information and democratic society 133–37, 142; traditional news as custodian of fact 136–37
- The Press Effect* (Jamieson, K.H. and Waldman, P.) 143
- Press Think* (Jay Rosen blog) 137
- Price, V. and Cappella, J.N. 147, 151
- Price, V., Cappella, J.N. and Nir, L. 145
- Price, V. *et al.* 147, 149
- Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, UK 183
- Prior, M. 140, 190, 192
- privacy law in US 343–44
- privacy paradigm, dominance of 346
- private sphere 244
- producer types 44–45, 51
- professional journalists, Web 2.0 impact on 211
- property in cyberspace, political economy of 349–63; *Abrams v. United States* (1919) 352; *Access Now v. Southwest Airlines* (2002) 351; central cases and their metaphors 355–61; Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA, 2000) 357, 358, 361, 421; Communications Decency Act (CDA, 1996) 361, 421; cyberspace, metaphorical construction of 350–55; external perspectives 354–55; filtering the public sphere 357–59; further reading guide

- 362–63; hyperlinks as binding ties 355–57; *Intel Corp. v. Hamidi* (2003) 354; internal perspectives 354–55; metaphor as twin-edged sword 351–52; metaphoric dominance and distortion 352–53; *MGM v. Grokster* 359–61, 362; perspective, tyranny of 354–55; political economy and transformation of cyberspace 350; property v. liberty interests 353–54, 361–62; *Reno v. ACLU* (1997) 361; safe havens and engineer's crystal ball 359–61; strategic use of metaphor 353; *United States v. American Libraries Association (ALA)* 357–59; *Universal City Studios v. Reimerdes* 355–57, 361
- protests and campaigns 247
- protocol, voluntary nature of 382
- Protocol* (Galloway, A.) 383
- psychology of learning online 193
- public: communication by, tracking flow of 97; distrust of Parliament by 86–87; Parliamentary visibility of 91–94, 98; and private opinion, narratives of 231–32; and private spheres, porous boundaries between 151–52, 154
- Public Administration Review* 117
- public management change and e-government 114–27; Accenture 116, 126; competition changes 118; cross-services integration 122–23; DEG (“digital-era governance”) 114, 117, 120, 126; digital-era governance, emergence of 119–25; digitization changes 123–25; disaggregation 118; disintermediation 124; e-government, definition of 114; e-government research 115–17; ESD (Electronic Services Delivery) 123–24; FEAP (Federal Enterprise Architecture Programs) 121; further reading guide 127; future for governance and research 126–27; government–citizen interaction 115, 123–25; GWACS (Government-Wide Acquisition Contracts) 121, 122; hyper-modernism 115–16; incentivization 118–19; needs-based holism 122–23; network simplification 122; NPM (New Public Management) reforms 114, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 126; one-stop provision 123; political agenda, IT policies and 115, 117; public management before e-government 117–19; reintegration 120–22; segmentation by customer 124–25; surveillance and control 116; UNPAN (UN Public Administration Network) 116; ZTT (“zero touch technology”) 124
- Public Management Reform* (Pollitt, C. and Boukhaert, G.) 117
- Public Opinion* (Lippmann, W.) 219
- public spaces online 230–45; alternative media online, importance for political transition 240; anti-globalization websites 240; AOL 242; atomized uses of online media 239; AT&T 242; blogs 237, 238; civic engagement 233–34; civic narcissism, benefits of 236–39; CNN 237; commercialization 234, 235–36; commercially public spaces 242–43; democratizing effect of narcissism 238–39; democratizing potential of online media 231; direct engagement, confusion in 240–41; exclusion from public sphere 234; further reading guide 244–45; Google 242, 243; hybrid influence 242–43; *Indymedia* 240; information, access to 234–35, 236; mobilization online 241; MySpace.com 242; pluralistic agonism 239–41; political potential of online news media 231; political uses of digital media 239–40; postmodern society and public sphere 233, 237; private sphere 244; public and private opinion, narratives of 231–32; public sphere, premise of 232–34, 243–44; reciprocity 234, 235, 236; self-expression, emphasis on 237; state and public sphere 232–33; subversion and direct representation 239–41; subversion online 241; video blogs (vlogs) 238; virtual sphere 1.0 234–36; virtual sphere 2.0 236–43; YouTube.com 242, 243
- Putin, Vladimir 218
- Putman, R.D. 77
- Putman, R.D., Feldstein, L. and Cohen, D. 77
- Putnam, R.D. 24, 26, 27, 30, 73, 100, 151, 155, 232, 237, 251, 277, 280, 285
- Putnam Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy 91
- Pye, L.W. 53
- Qatar 307, 308, 313
- Quicksilver initiative 106–7
- Qvortrup, M. 158, 162, 172
- race and ethnicity 179–81
- Radin, M.J. 354
- Rainie, L. and Horrigan, J. 174, 176, 206, 207, 212
- Rainie, L. and Kohut, A. 276
- Rainie, L. *et al.* 131–32, 147, 151
- Ranney, Austin 172
- Rappoport, P.N. and Alleman, J. 190
- Rash, W. 234, 235
- Rathman, T.A. 190
- Rattray, G.J. 335
- Ray, A. 267, 271
- REACH initiative in Jordan 314
- reading: online news 191–92; skills, critical nature of 182
- Reagan, Ronald 21
- real-time news 222
- reciprocity, public spaces online 234, 235, 236
- Reedy, Justin 8, 157–72, 425, xiv
- Reese, S.D. *et al.* 194
- The Referendum Experience in Europe* (Gallagher, M. and Uleri, P.V.) 172
- Referendums Around the World* (Butler, D. and Ranney, A.) 172

- regulatory responses to locational surveillance 346–47
- Reid, E.M. 263
- reintegration in public management 120–22
- reinvigoration of politics, internet and 144
- Reith, John 87
- religion and internet use 284
- Rennie, D. 167
- Reno v. ACLU* (1997) 361
- Reporters Without Borders 312, 313, 323
- representation: concept of 96; representative government 94–95; speaking for..... 94–97, 98
- The Concept of Representation* (Pitkin, H.) 96
- representative democracy: decline and crisis? 26–28, 37; optimism for 59
- Resnick, D. 33
- Resnick, P. 411
- Resnick, P. and Shah, V. 411
- RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) 339–40, 347
- Rhee, J.W. and Cappella, J.N. 146
- Rheingold, H. 32, 135, 144, 171, 281
- Rhine, R.J. 151
- Rice, Ronald E. 8, 144–56, 425, xiv
- Richard, M. 191
- Richardson, J.E. and Franklin, B. 210
- Riga Declaration (EC, 2006) 302
- Rittenberg, Jason 8, 186–200, 425, xiv
- Rivera, R. 342
- robots.txt exclusion commands 377, 378, 379–80
- Rochidi, N. 309
- Rockwell, S. and Singleton, L. 291
- Rodan, G. 335, 418
- Rodgers, J. 28–29
- Rodgers, S. and Harris, M.A. 265
- Roe Smith, M. 59
- Rogers, E.M. 40, 179, 254, 422
- Rogers, R. 251, 260
- Rogerson, Kenneth S. 9, 415–23, 425, xiv
- Rohozinski, Rafal 335n2
- Rommes, E. 268–69
- Romney, George 21
- Romney, Mitt 22
- Roosevelt, Franklin D. 102
- Rosen, Jay 137
- Rosenau, J.N. and Czempiel, E.O. 402
- Rosenthal, L.E. 311
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques 95
- routers 325
- Ruggie, J. 413
- Rugh, W. 309
- Russian censorship 224–25
- Rutenberg, J. 137
- Sabato, L.J. 21
- al-Saggaf, Yeslam 317
- Sakkas, L. 14
- Salaverria, R. 188
- Salter, L. 236
- Sanchez-Franco, M.J. and Roldan, J.L. 191
- Sassi, S. 234
- satellite TV 309
- Saudi Arabia 307, 308, 314; censorship in 224
- Savicki, V. *et al.* 262
- Savin, R. 343
- El-Sayed, H. and Westrup, C. 314
- Scammell, M. 238
- Schaap, F. 274
- Schauer, T. 266
- Schement, J. and Curtis, T. 235
- Schement, J.R. and Scott, S.C. 183
- Scheufele, D.A. 153, 155n1
- Scheufele, D.A. and Nisbet, M.C. 145, 147, 192, 236
- Scheufele, D.A. *et al.* 145
- Schiffauer, W. 281
- Schiller, D. 236, 242
- Schmitt, M. 68
- Schmitz, J. 235
- Schneider, Steven M. 40–55, xiv
- Schoenbach, K. *et al.* 194, 198
- Schönleitner, G. 256
- Schudson, M. 186, 234, 237, 240
- Schuler, D. and Day, P. 422, 423
- Schumpeter, Joseph 95
- Schwab, K. 313
- Schwartz, A. *et al.* 343
- Science of Collaboratories 410
- Sciolino, E. 157
- Scofield, John 108
- Scott, A. and Street, J. 33
- Scott, B. 34, 201, 204, 205, 209, 210, 211, 213
- Scott, J..253
- Scott, W.R. 76, 82, 100
- Scott, W.R. and Christensen, S. 82
- Scott, W.R. and Meyer, J.W. 76, 82
- SCP (Social and Cultural Planning, Netherlands) 298
- Sears, D. and Chaffee, S. 140
- Sears, D.O. and Freedman, J.L. 151
- Seattle “Battle” of 75–76, 205
- Seattle Post Intelligencer* 207
- security paradigm, dominance of 346
- Sefyrin, J. 270
- segmentation: of audiences for online news 187; by customer 124–25; online news 196, 199
- segregation and concentrated poverty 180
- Seifert, J.W. and McLoughlin, G.J. 109, 110
- selective exposure 150–51, 152
- self-expression 237
- Sell, S. 366, 367
- Semetko, H.A. and Krasnoboka, N. 240
- separation of powers 63
- Servaes, J. and Carpentier, N. 398

- Setala, M. and Gronlund, K. 88, 98
 Sey, A. and Castells, M. 145–46
 Shade, L.R. 265, 267, 273
 Shah, D., Kwak, N. and Holbert, R. 77, 276
 Shah, D.V. *et al.* 135, 147, 149, 151, 188, 189, 198, 234, 240
 Shah, D.V., McLeod, J.M. and Yoon, S.H. 277
 Shahin, J. and Neuhold, C. 88, 98
 Shannon, V. 342
 shared services 106–7, 108–9
 Shifman, L. *et al.* 38
 Shoemaker, P.J. and Reese, S.D. 148
 Siapera, E. 280
 Siddiquee, A. and Kagan, C. 280, 281, 286, 287
 Sierra Club 80
 Sikkink, K. 259
 Silvester, C. 220
 Simone, M. 240
 Simonelis, A. 390
 Singapore 417–18, 420; Ministry of Finance 420
 Singer, J.B. 188, 189, 210, 213
 Singer, J.B. and Gonzalez-Valez, M. 189
 site maps 380–82
 site producer types 51, 52
 6, Perri 120
 6, Perri, *et al.* 120, 122
 skills access 294–97, 303
 Skowronek, S. 101
 Slackman, M. 310
 small-scale forms of political engagement 4, 6–7
Small Tech (Hawk, B., Rieder, D.M. and Oviedo, O.) 383
 Smith, C. 267
 Smith, M.A. 168
 Smith, P. 359
 Snow, D. and Benford, R. 251, 259
 Snow, D. *et al.* 259
 social activism 246–60; absent ties 253–54; activist networks and technology 249–50, 258; activist relationships 247; coalitions in networks 253–54, 258; collective identification 252–53; diversity 252–53; fair trade campaigning 247–48, 255–56, 259; further reading guide 259–60; identity, narratives and network dynamics 250–54, 258; inclusiveness 252–53; information networks 246–47; narratives, identities and technology networks 254–58, 258–59; narratives and frames as analytical constructs 248–49, 259; network composition 247, 258–59; Northwest Social Forum (NWSF) 248, 256–58; permanent campaigns 246–47; protests and campaigns 247; social forums 247; strong ties 253–54; targets of campaigns 247; trade justice campaign 248, 255–56, 259; transnational advocacy 246–47; weak ties 253–54; “World says No War” 247, 254–55
 social activities “contextual integrity” of 347
 social and cultural differences 300
 social boundaries, weakening of 151–52
 social capital 77
 social mobilization 77
 social movements 345–46
 social networking: election campaigns in United States 22; parliamentary democracy, visibility of 90
 social research, information society and 398–99
 social structure, gender as 265–70, 273
 societal change, digital divide and 415–16
 societal internet uses 102–3
 sociological determinism 58
 Songer, D. and Sheehan, R. 353
Sony v. Universal City (1984) 359, 361–62
 Sorauf, F.J. 67
 Spar, D.L. 350
 Sparks, C. 201, 204, 206, 208
 Spotila, John 108
 Spriggs, J.F. and Wahlbeck, P. 353
 Stanley, L. 179
 Stanyer, James 7, 8–9, 201–13, 426, xv
 Staples, B. 158
Star Tribune 207
 Starr, P. 100, 217
 Stern, C. 393
 Stewart, A. 227
 Steyaert, J. 294
 Stinchcombe, A.L. 77
 Stohl, Cynthia 72–85, xv
 StopBadware.org 400n11
 Strangelove, M. 375
 Street, J. 423
 Stromer-Galley, J. 6, 17, 152
 subversion: and direct representation 239–41; public spaces online 241
 Suleiman, Abdel Kareem Nabil 315
 Sullivan, Andrew 221
 Sum, N.-L. 372
Sun 211
 Sundar, S.S. 190, 193
 Sundar, S.S. and Nass, C. 191
 Sundar, S.S. *et al.* 189
Sunday Telegraph 211
 Sunstein, C.R. 24, 34, 135, 145, 151, 155, 169–70, 187, 197, 199, 200, 203, 352
 surveillance *see* locational surveillance
 Swanson, D. 239
 Swartz, N. 419
 Swedberg, C. 340
 Syria 306, 307, 308, 314, 319
Tampa Tribune 211
 Tanner, E. 170
 Taranto, Richard 360
 Tarde, G. 147
 Tarrow, S. 74, 283

- Taylor, P. 21
- technical knowledge, digital divide and 415–16
- technical skills, digital citizenship and 181–82
- techno-governmentality 376
- techno-social spaces, uses of 268–69, 270–72
- TechnoFeminism* (Wajcman, J.) 274
- technological change and political organization
- 72–85; affordances of internet 83–84; American Legion 80; Amnesty International 80; anti-Iraqi war marches 76; collective action 72–73, 74–76; collective action space 82; engagement 80–82; Facebook 81; flexibility of internet 82–83; further reading guide 85; institutional engagement 80–81; interaction 79–80; interest group mobilization 77–78; internet, interaction and engagement 82–84; internet dynamics 82–83; MeetUp 73, 81, 83; MySpace 73, 81; non-hierarchical networks 76–77; NRA (National Rifle Association) 81; online civic association 73–74; organizational fecundity 73, 74–78, 84; organizational structures 73, 76–77; organizing and organization 78–79; Seattle, “Battle” of 75–76; Sierra Club 80; social capital 77; social mobilization 77; theoretical integration across perspectives 78–84, 84–85
- technological determinism 58, 59
- technological development, web production 49, 52
- Tekwani, S. 281
- Telemundo* 286
- TeleNav Inc. 338–39
- Tewksbury, D. and Althaus, S.L. 150, 191, 192
- Tewksbury, D. and Maddex, B. 197
- Tewksbury, D. *et al.* 192
- Tewksbury, David 8, 186–200, 425, xv
- Thalheimer, M. 429
- TheyWorkForYou 90
- Thierer, A.D. 179
- Thomas, J.C. and Streib, G. 175
- Thompson, J.B. 87, 282
- Thurman, N. 207, 212, 213
- Thurmond, Storm 194
- Tiefenbrun, S.W. 351
- Tiller, E.H. and Cross, F. 350, 353
- Tilly, C. 72, 253
- Time* 270
- Times* of London 207
- Tkach-Kawasaki, L.M. 55, 57
- Toennies, F. 82
- Toft, A. *et al.* 248
- Toft, Amoshaun 9, 246–60, 425, xv
- Tolbert, C. and McNeal, R. 175, 194
- Tolbert, C. and Mossberger, K. 175
- top-down approach to internet 311–14, 319
- top-down media apparatus 219–21
- Torvalds, Linus 374
- Townsend, A.M. and Bennett, J.T. 344
- Trade and Industry, UK Dept of 183
- trade justice campaign 248, 255–56, 259
- Trammell, K.D. 17
- transnational advocacy 246–47
- transnational internet use 278, 280–81
- transnational policy networks 413
- transnational technology diffusion 40
- Tremayne, M. 189, 237
- Tremayne, M. and Dunwoody, S. 193
- Tremayne, M. *et al.* 150
- Trend, D. 273
- Treschel, A. and Kriesi, H. 160
- Trippi, J. 13, 17, 59, 60, 71
- TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement 365–67, 371
- Tuchman, G. 148
- Tunisia: Arab world, internet use and political identity 306, 307, 308, 314, 319; geopolitics of internet control 323–24
- Turk, Michael 17
- Turkey: Arab world, internet use and political identity 306
- Turkle, S. 263, 264, 281
- Twist, J. 210
- UAE Yearbook* 311
- UCLA 290, 296, 299, 300
- UK Election Commission 67
- Uleri, Pier Vincenzo 172
- United Arab Emirates (UAE) 306, 307, 308, 311, 313
- United Nations 387; Development Program 313; Global Alliance for ICTs and Development 408–9; Human Development Index 47, 49, 52, 428; UNCTAD 369, 372, 373; UNESCO 371, 387; UNPAN (UN Public Administration Network) 116; World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) 403–4
- United States: Agriculture Dept. 340; and Britain, comparisons between 70–71; Defense Dept. 333; digital divide, internet diffusion and 417, 418, 420–21; direct democracy 159–60; news consumption 429–31
- United States v. ALA* (2003) 357–59
- Universal City Studios v. Reimerdes/Corley* (2000) 355–56, 357, 361
- Unspun* (Jamieson, K.H. and Jackson, B.) 143
- Urban Tapestries project 347
- USA Today* 207
- usage access 297–99, 303
- user-controlled online communication 21–23
- user experience, richness in 4, 7
- user-generated news sites 203
- Uslaner, E.M. 235, 276
- Valentino, N.A. *et al.* 55
- van Aelst, P. and Walgrave, S. 240
- van de Donk, W. *et al.* 32, 39, 116
- van der Wurff, R. 210

- van Dijk, J. *et al.* 296
 van Dijk, J., Hanenburg, M. and Pieterse, W. 290
 van Dijk, Jan A.G.M. 9, 43, 179, 181, 185, 288–304, 425, xv
 van Doorn, N. *et al.* 264, 272
 van Doorn, Niels 9, 261–74, 426, xv
 Van Hanne's democracy rankings 428
 van Slyke, C. *et al.* 265
 van Zoonen, Liesbet 9, 261–74, 426, xv
 Vanden Berg, Jessica 69
 Vanhanen, T. 47, 52
 Vargas, J.A. 21, 22
 Vedres, B. *et al.* 44
 Ventura, Jesse 15, 16, 59
 Verba, S. *et al.* 53, 146, 147, 155, 176, 184
 Vertovec, S. 285, 287
 Vice President, Office of the US 103
 video blogs (vlogs) 238
 video recording election campaigns 21–22
 Villanueva, Edgar 372
 Villeneuve, N. 335
 Virilio, P. 227
 virtual internet use 278, 281–82
 virtual sphere 1.0 234–36
 virtual sphere 2.0 236–43
Voices of Europe (Hug, S.) 172
 VOIP (“voice over internet protocol”) services 328–29
 volunteer recruitment 17–18
 von Hippel, E. 373, 375
- W3 (World Wide Web Consortium) 377, 401
 Wade, R.H. 371
 Wajcman, J. 263, 264, 268, 274
 Waldman, Paul 143
 Walgrave, S. and Rucht, D. 255
 Walgrave, Stefan 260
 Walker, J.L. 78, 80
 Wall, D. 27
 Wall, M. 194
Wall Street Journal 207, 218
 Wanta, W. 148
 Ward, S. and Lusoli, W. 88
 Ward, S.J. and Franco, M. 61
 Ward, S.J. and Gibson, R.K. 31
 Ward, S.J. and Vedel, T. 34, 39n1
 Ward, S.J. and Voerman, G. 55
 Ward, S.J. *et al.* 33, 34, 39n2
 Ward, Stephen 25–39, 56, 71, 426, xv
 Wardrip-Fruin, N. and Montfort, N. 383
 Ware, A. 63, 66, 71
 Warf, B. and Vincent, P. 328
 Warschauer, M. 181, 182, 185, 303, 304, 306
 Washbourne, N. 31
 Washington Poll (2006) Public Policy Attitudes 163, 164, 165
Washington Post 207, 379
 Washington State, state-wide initiatives 163–65
 Waskul, D.D. 266, 274
 Watts, D. 222
 Weare, C. and Lin, W. 136
 Web 2.0 201–13; *Alternative Press Center* 205; alternative sources of news, use of 207–8; AOL News 205, 208, 209; audience input 210–11, 212; BBC News Online 157, 204, 207, 209, 210, 221; blogs 204–5; CNN 203, 204, 206, 208, 209; collective intelligence from political web use 4, 5; cross-subsidy 209–10; data, importance of 4, 6; democratic experimentalism 4, 6; diversity in online news 208–9, 212; European political organizations 30; Facebook 202; financial uncertainty and cross-subsidy 209–10; further reading guide 213; gender, internet and theorizing on 270–72, 273; Google News 205, 206; *Guerrilla News Network* 205; *Indymedia* 205; internet as platform for political discourse 4–5; Journalism, Project for Excellence in 202–11, 213; limitations on audience input 210–11, 212; local websites 204; long tail, theory of 4–5; market leaders 205–8; media sectors, convergence of 204; MSNBC 203, 206, 209; MySpace 202; new questions and outcomes? 270–72, 273; news and 202–3; niche news providers 204–5, 212; online news aggregators 205; open-source news 212; parties and election campaigns 65; place blogs 204; principles of 4; professional journalists, impact on 211; propagation of content over multiple applications 4, 6–7; reconfiguration of news markets 203–5, 212–13; Seattle, “Battle” of 205; small-scale forms of political engagement 4, 6–7; user experience, richness in 4, 7; user-generated news sites 203; website ownership and diversity in online news 208–9, 212; Yahoo! 205, 206; YouTube 202
 Webb, Jim 22, 60, 69
 Webb, P. 64, 66
 Webcamer.org 8, 61, 70
 Webcrawler (AOL) 378
 Weber, S. 5, 375
 Websense 331
 Webster, F. 350
 Webster, J.G. and Lin, S.F. 39, 191
 Webster, J.G. and Phalen, P.F. 196, 199
 Weinberger, D. 5
 Welch, E.W. *et al.* 175
 Wellman, B. and Gulia, M. 276
 Wellman, B. *et al.* 282
 Wells, Chris 8, 157–72, 425, xv
 West, D.M. 109, 110, 112, 117, 127, 174, 175, 182
 Westerdal, J. 405
 WGIG (Working Group on Internet Governance) 387, 407–8
 Wheeler, Deborah L. 9, 305–20, 425, xv

- Whitaker, C. 253
White, D.M. 188
White House robots.txt files 379–80, 382
Whitehouse, A. 265
Wiklund, H. 102
Wilding, F. 267
Wilhelm, A.G. 24, 175, 304
Williams, A. 23
Williams, A.P. and Tedesco, J.C. 24, 55
Williams, F. 234
Williams, F. and Pavlik, J.V. 234
Williams, H. 393, 395
Wilson, E.J. 40, 53, 55, 416, 421, 422, 423
Wilson, E.J. and Wong, K.R. 423
Wilson, Harold 220
Winer, Dave 4
Winneg, K. and Stroud, T. 132, 135, 141
Winneg, K. *at al.* 132
Winneg, Kenneth 131–43, xv
Winston, B. 368, 375
WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) 366, 367
Wise, C.R. 121
Witmer, D.F. and Katzman, S.L. 262
Witt, L. 188
Wojcieszak, M. and Mutz, D. 149, 152
Wolfinger, R. and Rosenstone, S.J. 175, 176
Wolinsky, H. 346
workplace regulation 344–45
World Bank 427
World Competitiveness Report 313
World Conference on Women (1995) 267
World Information Access Project 40, 432–33
World Internet Project 400n10
World Internet Usage and Population Statistics 231
“World says No War” 247, 254–55
World Values Survey (WVS) 47, 50, 52, 55, 428
Wright, T. *et al.* 264
Wring, D. and Horrocks, I. 32
WSIS (World Summit on the Information Society) 399n1, 403–4, 428; case study 386–87; global internet governance, multi-stakeholder participation in 406–7, 413; governance challenge of 385–86; internet governance, comparison of traditional and WSIS processes 391; internet governance and 390–93, 397–98; multi-stakeholder approach, success or failure? 388–90, 398; multi-stakeholder origins 387–88; policy-making paradigm, exemplar of? 386–87, 398; WSIS Civil Society 387, 388, 389, 397, 404, 428
WTO (World Trade Organization) 366–67, 371
Wu, H.D. and Bechtel, A. 191
Wu, T. 335
Wulf, W.A. 410

Xenos, M. and Foot, K.A. 44
Xenos, Michael 40–55, xv

Yahoo! 205, 206
Yan, W. 418
Yates, J. and Orlikowski, W.J. 44
Yemen 307, 308
Yervasi, C. 267
YouTube.com 5, 7–8, 21, 22, 60; deception, role of internet in identification of 131; gender, internet and theorizing on 270, 271, 272; global media environment 221, 223; public spaces online 242, 243; Web 2.0 202
Yuan, Y. *et al.* 85
Yun, H.K. 420

Zaller, J.R. 151, 155
Zayani, M. 224
Zewail, A. 314
Zhou, M. and Cai, G. 276, 287
Zhou, Y. and Moy, P. 188
Zittel, T. 35, 38, 57, 88
Zittrain, J.L. 335n2, 363, 385
ZTT (“zero touch technology”) 124
Zukin, C. and Snyder, R. 192

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