

**MATT BAI**

# Bloggers at the Gate

*The Internet hasn't perfected democracy. But it might.*

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**THE MYTH OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY** BY MATTHEW HINDMAN • PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS • 2008 • 198 PAGES • \$22.95

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ne of the most common clichés in Washington—up there with, say, now-nauseating references to “game-changers” and Barack Obama’s “team of rivals”—is that the Internet has suddenly transformed our politics. This isn’t really true. Rather, over the last decade, the Internet has transformed just about everything in American life. Ordinary Americans of all ages increasingly do their banking online, buy their cars online, shop for groceries and medications online, pay their taxes online, conduct meetings online, rent movies online, even meet their spouses online. And politics, which is always sluggish to adapt to larger cultural trends—we still wear ties to work in the Capitol, you know—is simply the last of our institutions to be slowly pulled along.

In 2000, in the days following the New Hampshire primary, John McCain raised more than \$1 million online. Most of the respected consultants in

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MATT BAI, *who writes on national politics for The New York Times Magazine, is the author of The Argument: Inside the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics.*

Washington yawned and noted, correctly, that \$1 million wasn't really so much. Four years later, Howard Dean discovered Meetup and MoveOn, not to mention the fledgling blogger movement and tapped the "netroots" for \$25 million, catapulting him from afterthought to front-runner. Okay, the sages said, that was all kind of impressive, but he lost every state but his own, proving that the Web was still just a haven for hippie kids in hemp pants. (Then again, so is Vermont.)

Then, of course, came 2008, when Barack Obama blew the lid off everything that came before, raising an ungodly \$750 million—most of it online and in small chunks, from a pool of some four million contributors. Meanwhile, traditional TV ads seemed powerless, the product of a magic wand that had lost its charge, while enterprising citizens created YouTube ads and videos that became as iconic, in their own way, as Lyndon Johnson's daisy spot was in 1964; 20 years from now, we'll probably still be talking about "Obama Girl" and her lustful obsession. So-called mainstream media struggled to maintain their access and currency; meanwhile, a blogger for The Huffington Post's Off the Bus project broke the story of Obama's comments about "bitter" voters in rural Pennsylvania.

It's getting harder now for anyone in politics to contend that the Web represents another small leap on the technological continuum, no more or less transformational than the advent of direct mail and toll-free telephone lines. In fact, the online revolution appears to be changing the nature of political influence and citizen participation.

Consider the case of Gina Cooper, who is probably one of the few hundred most influential progressives outside the capital, someone whose emergence wouldn't have been possible at any other time in American history. Born in Memphis to a father whose identity she never knew and a mother who died of cancer thirteen years later, Gina grew up in her older sister's conservative household, went to a small Catholic college, and became a high school science teacher. That's what she was doing with her life in 2003, when George W. Bush's military invaded Iraq, and when Gina, incensed by her government and feeling politically powerless, discovered the liberal blog known as Daily Kos. At first she simply trolled around the site on her lunch breaks and after school; then she started posting biting and surprisingly funny commentaries.

When a few members of the Kos community wondered aloud about organizing an actual, in-person gathering of their virtual selves, Gina volunteered to take charge. Soon she and a cadre of volunteers—people with no formal political experience and no ties even to their local Democratic parties—were building the annual convention known first as Yearly Kos and now as Netroots Nation. In 2007, in the run-up to the Democratic primaries, the convention hosted a debate among all but one of the party's potential nominees, including Barack Obama

and Hillary Clinton (I helped moderate it); at last year's Netroots Nation, Gina herself conducted on-stage interviews with Al Gore and Nancy Pelosi. For one of the presidential debates last fall between Obama and McCain, CNN flew Gina to Washington so she could appear live on the set, clicking away on a computer while debating a Republican opponent across the table. She seemed a little nervous—and who wouldn't be? Until a few years ago, after all, the only thing on which she had ever held forth for an audience was the periodic table of elements.

I have often cited Gina's story and others like it as evidence of where politics—and progressive politics in particular—is headed. "Democratization" is the word we often use. Suddenly, it seems, power is being transferred away from concentrated centers in Washington and toward online activists whose only formal training in politics comes from reading MoveOn.org's website or one of the many strident, partisan blogs that attract more readers, on a daily basis, than all but a handful of American newspapers and journals.

This has obvious and uplifting implications, the potential to draw more people and more passion into the public square, to create a genuine conversation where before there had been only a loudspeaker and a captive audience. But it also tilts us a little further from the republican model that has been America's strength for 200-plus years and toward something approaching Athenian democracy. This means, perhaps, more calls for ballot initiatives rather than legislation, more demands to restructure the Senate to allot seats by population rather than by equal proxy for every state. Taken to its extreme, such a cultural revolution might well endanger the balance between monarchy and populism for which the Framers so brilliantly and successfully strived.

**B**ut hold on—skepticism remains, and it has a new champion. In *The Myth Of Digital Democracy*, Matthew Hindman, a political science professor at Arizona State University, argues that the Internet hasn't really broadened or decentralized the structure of politics at all; it's just sort of rearranged the furniture. According to Hindman, American politics and media, far from being democratized in any way, are still controlled by a relative handful of activists and gatekeepers. Some of the names and faces may have changed, but the small club of people engaged and empowered is just as exclusive as ever—wealthier, whiter, more educated, and far more liberal than your average American. Sure, Hindman says, political activism and journalism are moving predominately online, but that doesn't mean that hierarchies are being flattened and influence splintered. In fact, he says, there's really no numerical evidence to suggest that the average American is any more involved politically than he was during the apex of the broadcast age—which is to say, not very involved at all.

In other words, Hindman is saying that the Gina Coopers of the world make for nice, inspiring stories, but they don't represent any significant departure from the people who hung out in the last era's smoke-filled political clubs, and they haven't begun to redistribute the essential balance of power in the democracy from large institutions to individual voters. Meet the new elites, same as the old, except maybe for the laptops.

At this point, it's only fair for me to say a word about political scientists and political journalists, who generally regard one another with the same low-grade disdain that probably characterizes the relationship between, say, legal scholars and urban prosecutors. Academics who study politics often consider those of us who write about the field to be superficial, simple-minded and—the greatest indictment of all—*unscientific*. We interview three people in an Iowa diner and act as if we have penetrated the very

soul of America. (Such allegations are, sadly, true enough.) Hindman's book is permeated by just this kind of mild contempt for political journalists, who, in his view, have mindlessly extolled the democratizing virtues of the Internet while not possessing the basic intellectual skills necessary to quantify their

assertions. *The Myth of Digital Democracy* features no less than eight visual figures and 21 tables, along with detailed dissections of such metrics as the "Herfindahl-Hirschman Index," which I can't really explain to you beyond the fact that it seems to involve Greek symbols and some algebra.

Generally speaking, political writers don't think so much of political scientists, either, mostly because anyone who has ever actually worked in or covered politics can tell you that, whatever else it may be, a science isn't one of them. Politics is, after all, the business of humans attempting to triumph over their own disorder, insecurity, competitiveness, arrogance, and infidelity; make all the equations you want, but a lot of politics is simply tactile and visual, rather than empirical. My dinnertime conversation with three Iowans may not add up to a reliable portrait of the national consensus, but it's often more illuminating than the dissertations of academics whose idea of seeing America is a trip to the local Bed, Bath & Beyond.

Now, having put that bias on the table, there is much in Hindman's book that is persuasive, counterintuitive, and important to understanding the moment. Hindman's data backs up what should be obvious about the political blogs, for instance—that they are populated by a small and fairly homogenous group of

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people who constitute their own kind of political elite. The founder of Daily Kos, Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, is a law school graduate who lives in Berkeley; the lead blogger on FireDogLake, Jane Hamsher, used to be the Hollywood producer of such family films as “Natural Born Killers”; Chris Bowers, the signature voice of Open Left, is (or at least was when I first met him) a graduate student in sociology. To suggest that the voices of 100 or so prominent bloggers of similar pedigree represent some new, more inclusive voice of the American everyman—which is what the bloggers themselves like to profess—is just fantasy.

It’s true, too, as Hindman puts it, that “there is a difference between speaking and being heard.” Just because the Web is bursting with new media sites doesn’t necessarily mean that outsiders are exercising more influence over the process than they used to. “Most online content,” Hindman notes, “receives no links, attracts no eyeballs, and has minimal political relevance.” As Hindman writes, most of the traffic and influence online still belong to a few mammoth sites: MSN, Google, and AOL; the New York Times; and CNN. The formats have changed, but the relative market shares of large and alternative media have remained fairly stable. Despite the anti-corporate impulses of the Web, consumers still want to get their news and opinion from the familiar brands they know and at least partly trust.

The problem with statistical modeling, however, is that, like polling, it only reflects a particular moment in time. And the political impact of the Internet is spreading so quickly that it’s almost impossible to capture and quantify. Hindman’s study of Howard Dean’s 2004 campaign, for instance, leads him to conclude that while the Internet may be a useful tool for raising money from a certain segment of ideological voters, the wider population of less engaged voters isn’t really affected by what happens on the Web. This was probably true in 2004; Dean’s campaign attracted mostly the early adapters online, those hypercontemporary types who were downloading music and printing out their own digital photos before the rest of us. But the success of Obama’s campaign suggests that it probably isn’t so anymore.

**O**bama’s breathtaking ability to attract money and volunteers online is almost certain to be surpassed within the next few election cycles, and it indicates that the pool of voters connecting to politics principally through online outlets is now moving beyond the most ardent and ideological set. And thus the Internet probably is translating into an increased level of civic engagement, even if it’s happening gradually. What’s more, much of that increased engagement seems likely to sustain itself. When a voter makes a decision to contribute some amount of his hard-earned wages to a presidential

campaign, he is far more likely to follow the presidency as if it were a stock, eager to monitor the return on his investment. According to a Pew survey, more than 62 percent of Obama voters say they will probably urge others to get behind his agenda.

One might be tempted to attribute this explosion in Internet-based activity to Obama's singular appeal as a candidate or to widespread revulsion to the Bush era. But it probably has just as much to do with the basic proliferation of broadband technology in the last several years and the fast-moving transformation of the American household. (When I speak to groups about politics, I make a habit of asking how many people in the room had a high-speed Internet connection in 2004 and then how many have one now; almost invariably, the number of hands doubles on the second question.) As Hindman points out, the broadband Internet isn't spreading at the same torrid rate now that it was earlier in the decade, but it is spreading, and more to the point, so is the tendency of Americans to incorporate it into their daily lives. It seems inevitable that my small children will cast their first political ballots on a home computer rather than in a voting booth—to do it any other way will probably seem to them as antiquated as the eight-track tape does today.

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It certainly isn't a given that our political system then will be so much better off and more inclusive than it is now. Technology by itself isn't an instrument of political change; the Internet is no more going to automatically deliver us a more perfect union than cable television did, with its corrosive culture of 10-second sound bites and meaningless, cotton-headed debate. It's up to us to realize the potential of Web-based politics—by making government more transparent and online-accessible, by giving voters the kind of political dialogue that does more than depress them. Most critically, there can be no digital democracy as long as whole swaths of the country—rural and urban, white and nonwhite—lack access to broadband technology. (According to the latest figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperations and Development, about 25 percent of Americans have broadband now, placing us behind 14 other countries globally.) While the recent stimulus package (at press time, the details were being debated in Congress) set aside billions of dollars to increase this number, the nation still has no concrete, overarching plan to ensure that lower-income Americans in both urban and rural areas aren't left on the other side of what Bill Clinton called his “bridge to the 21st century.” Until then, any talk of the

Internet as having created a more inclusive, more bottom-up kind of American politics will be illusory and premature.

Still, we're a long way from being able to declare digital democracy a shibboleth. The idea that the Web has ultimately fallen short of its potential is a conclusion we might justifiably reach in 2018, when the *New York Times* has become a blog called FitToWhine.com and my friend Gina Cooper is a powerhouse lobbyist for ExxonMobil. To measure the impact of the Web on politics circa 2007, though, as professor Hindman has admirably done, is a little like having tried to account for the impact of television in 1960. (Imagine having written "The Myth of Broadcast Democracy.") It's worth doing, but one can hardly render a final verdict. Digital democracy isn't necessarily a myth. It's just not yet a reality, and those are two different things. ■