



NEW MYTHS, OLD TRUTHS

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Reviewing

MATTHEW HINDMAN, *THE MYTH OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY*
(Princeton University Press 2009)

MYTHBUSTING IS A SEDUCTIVE ENTERPRISE. The Discovery Channel devotes an entire series to it, appropriately named “MythBusters” in which a hearty band of hosts tests popular propositions. This show has answered in the negative such pernicious myths as: Can you pop popcorn by detonating a propane tank? Will black coffee sober up an intoxicated person? Can tooth fillings pick up radio signals?¹ The magicians Penn Jillette and Teller host “Bullshit,” an HBO series, which debunks more robust policy claims (recent segments confront sensitivity training and “green” living).² In ancient Network television times, mythbusting was a popular theme for investigative reporting on such shows as “60 Minutes.”

Matthew Hindman, a professor of political science at Arizona State University, seeks to bust myths, too.³ He contends in this book “that the beliefs that the Internet is democratizing politics are simply wrong.”⁴ He sets his sights on twin myths: first, that the In-

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¹ See The Complete Mythbusters Show Guide, <http://dsc.discovery.com/fan-sites/mythbusters/episode/episode.html>.

² See Penn & Teller: Bullshit Episodes, www.sho.com/site/ptbs/episodes.do.

³ Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2009).

⁴ *Id.* at 3.

ternet has extended political “voice” to previously voiceless precincts, and, second, that it has facilitated deliberation among these new speakers. Instead, Hindman asserts that online politics remains “politics as usual.”⁵

In support, he has marshaled an impressive body of empirical work. Hindman’s data show that politics online is more centralized than users realize. In cyberspace, as in the material world, the bulk of the talk is in the hands of a few. He dubs his insight “Googlearchy” and contends that the way Internet traffic circulates means the highly visible sites (and speakers) will only become more so.⁶

Meanwhile, politics occupies a fraction of Internet activity (1/10 of one percent). This share pales in comparison to, say, pornography (10 percent).⁷ Oddly, in Hindman’s same summary of the data, “political sites” are distinguished from “news and media” sites (2.9 percent) that would also distribute political information and host the political rants of their reader-commenters. Those few, intrepid souls (1/2 of one percent) who visit political sites are not some new breed of activist, we are cautioned. They are, as is the case with the politically active in the material world, older and more male than web users generally.⁸

Hindman also demonstrates that notwithstanding their relative maturity, this 1/2 of one percent are not skilled at obtaining the political information they seek. His data show that users tend not to structure their search queries properly, and seldom look past the first page of whatever pops up. In addition, their search activity tends to be directed less toward learning about a topic, and more toward obtaining a specific piece of information from a specific outlet.⁹ Moreover, it doesn’t take much experience on political sites to realize the level of discourse can leave something to be desired.

⁵ Id. at 9.

⁶ Id. at 38-57 (describing “Googlearchy”).

⁷ Id. at 61, see also id. at 81 (“Pornographic content is two orders of magnitude more popular than political content” in site visits.).

⁸ Id. at 67-68.

⁹ Id. at 73.

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Hindman is not impressed by the even smaller fraction of these users that provide content as bloggers. Hindman takes on the myth of the blogger as “citizen journalist” by revealing that top bloggers are, for the most part, journalists, products of elite educational institutions, and residents of fancy neighborhoods.¹⁰ Whatever information they offer, many of them would have been in the position to address the public even without the rise of the blog. Hindman answers the question “How different are bloggers from . . . the “elite media” with “not much.”¹¹ He adds: “Overwhelmingly they are white male professionals.”¹²

But Internet political communications have changed some things. This is an era in which youth-produced viral videos can take down a large grassroots community organization (ACORN).¹³ It is an age when Rep. Joe “You Lie” Wilson¹⁴ is, after shouting during President Obama’s health care address to Congress, showered with Internet campaign contributions from across the nation (as is his opponent).¹⁵ Hindman has a tough case to make to “bust” that story. The Internet has changed politics in many important ways. The mechanics behind fundraising have become cheaper, leaving more money for publicity, staff (and of course *lawyers*). Grassroots organization has been immensely streamlined. Imagine the infrastructure it would have required to organize a national series of “tea parties” without the ability to publish, network, and tweet about it online. Or imagine how the civil rights activists of the 50s and 60s could have used a national tool for direct contact, publicity, and organization.

At the same time, the principal figures in a campaign – the candidates and party leaders, and their consultants – are less able to

¹⁰ Id. at 113-16.

¹¹ Id. at 117.

¹² Id. at 128.

¹³ See Baltimore video clip at www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtTnizEnC1U.

¹⁴ See President Obama’s address to Congress at www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxHKSHvMRWE.

¹⁵ Seanna Adcox & Ben Evans, Dems to vote on admonishing Wilson, *Newsday*, Sept. 12, 2009, at A18.

control the “message.” A verbal miscue, such as Virginia gubernatorial candidate George Allen’s use of the epithet “macaca” to describe an opponent’s campaign volunteer in 2006,¹⁶ once on YouTube can run roughshod over any preplanned strategy or damage control. If we want to broaden the “voice” inputs into a campaign, this development would seem a salutary one.

It is also the case that some publishing models make less sense now. One would be hard pressed today to launch a subscription-funded newsletter in a niche field like campaign finance law, when there are numerous blogs and reform-group sites offering the same information.¹⁷ But “news” today is more permanent, and specialists in such niche fields need no longer preserve files of news clippings or tapes of broadcasts. The same resource, in more refined and searchable form, is online.

No doubt Hindman’s research is correct, search engines consolidate Web traffic, and some nontrivial number of old guys are sitting at home generating bad search results (when not looking at naughty bits). But to observe that “digital democracy” isn’t always and everywhere the rule is not the same thing as saying that the Internet hasn’t “democratized” politics. Of course, people who are already interested in politics are more likely to participate in politics online. And it isn’t surprising that their demographics are somewhat “elite,” as are the demographics of individuals who donate, volunteer, write their Representatives, and vote. For the Internet to be “democratizing” we shouldn’t require that it be *revolutionary*, only that at the margins it provide a broader population with more opportunities to contribute, volunteer, engage, and advocate, and make changes that are sustainable over time.

Hindman’s generalizations look past the fundamental point – when individuals use the Internet for independent political research and communications they are doing something new. Not just on a new platform – the integration and the freedom it offers is different

¹⁶ Which is here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=r90z0PMnKwI.

¹⁷ Consider, for example, the demise of *PACs and Lobbies*, an influential newsletter edited by Ed Zuckerman.

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in kind. Suppose a middle-class Massachusetts voter, listening to the news of the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott, felt moved to support the nascent civil rights movement. How? A contribution, sure, but to whom, and where? How long will it take to arrive? Can the donor assess the bona fides of the recipient?

This person then wants to tell others about the news and how to support the protesters, but other than friends and neighbors he can only hope the local paper will print his letter, after some days have passed. Meanwhile, all this information-gathering is consuming time needed for chores, work, and family. Moreover, he will need to make his identity known in every contact, and some of the institutions even in his Massachusetts town may be hostile to the civil rights movement. His enthusiasm for the fight may yield to his interest in personal self-preservation.

What barriers would that Massachusetts civil rights supporter face today? Once the person has access to a computer, some form of telecommunications, and a debit card (or Paypal), essentially none, except perhaps anomie.

Genuine democracy must contend, now as before, with a blasé demos. The Internet can help in some ways, when new talent packages politics in entertaining ways, as did Jib Jab¹⁸ and GoRemy.¹⁹ But just as more pop music is more about getting intimate than about getting political, the relative titillation scale won't ever favor public affairs over private ones. Nevertheless, making politics easier, safer, and freer for those souls who do find it worth their time can't be anything BUT democratizing.



¹⁸ Jib Jab, 'Time for Some Campaignin' (2008), http://sendables.jibjab.com/originals/time_for_some_campaignin.

¹⁹ GoRemy, 'Going Green with Cap and Trade' (2009), www.youtube.com/watch?v=Si-htSSHxsE.