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**BOOK REVIEW: *THE MYTH OF
DIGITAL DEMOCRACY,*
BY MATTHEW HINDMAN**

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Book Review: *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, by Matthew Hindman
(2009, Princeton University Press)

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Mythbusting is a seductive enterprise. The Discovery Channel devotes an entire series to it, appropriately named “MythBusters” in which a hearty band of hosts test popular propositions. This show has answered in the negative such pernicious myths such 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 such as on “60 Minutes” most distinctively during that probative segment hosted by Andy Rooney.³

Matthew Hindman, a professor of political science at Arizona State University, seeks to bust myths, too.⁴ He contends in this book “that the beliefs that the Internet is democratizing politics are simply wrong.”⁵ He sets his sights on twin myths; first, that the Internet has extended political “voice” to previously voiceless precincts, and that it has facilitated deliberation among these new speakers. Instead, Hindman asserts that online politics remains “politics as usual.”⁶

In support, he has marshaled an impressive body of empirical work. Hindman’s data demonstrate 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.⁷

Meanwhile, politics occupies a fraction of Internet activity (1/10 of a percent). This share pales as compared with, say, pornography (ten percent).⁸ Oddly, in Hindman’s same summary of the data, “political sites” are distinguished from “news

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

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

³ See 60 Minutes: Andy Rooney Video,
<http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/60minutes/rooney/main3419.shtml> (citing facetiously, as Rooney does no mythbusting, but does complain about his shoes, among other things).

⁴ Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2009).

⁵ Id. at 3.

⁶ Id. at 9.

⁷ Id. at 38-57 (describing “Googlearchy”).

⁸ Id. at 61, see also id. at 81 (“Pornographic content is two orders of magnitude more popular than political content” in site visits.)

and media” sites (2.9 percent), which would also distribute political information and host the political rants of their reader-commenters. Those intrepid souls – the ½ of one percent -- who visit political sites are not some new breed of activist, we are cautioned. They are, as is the case with politics in the material world, older and more male than web users generally.⁹

Notwithstanding their relative maturity, Hindman also demonstrates that this ½ of one percent are not skilled at obtaining the political information they seek. His data show that users tend not to structure properly their search queries, and seldom look past the first page of whatever pops up. Political search activity is also less about topics, and more focused on obtaining whatever information from a specific outlet.¹⁰ Moreover, it doesn’t take much experience on political sites to realize the level of discourse can leave something to be desired.

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.¹¹ Whatever information they offer, many 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.”¹² He adds: “Overwhelmingly they are white male professionals.”¹³

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).¹⁴ It is an age when Rep. Joe “You Lie” Wilson¹⁵ 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)¹⁶ 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

⁹ Id. at 67-68.

¹⁰ Id. at 73.

¹¹ Id. at 113-16.

¹² Id. at 117.

¹³ Id. at 128.

¹⁴ See Baltimore video clip at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtTnizEnC1U>.

¹⁵ See President Obama’s address to congress at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxHKSHvMRWE>

¹⁶ Seanna Adcox & Ben Evans, Wilson’s, Opponent’s Campaign Treasury Growing, AP, Sept. 11, 2009, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gqPgZr9fnMP1-0DTplQLY4zofswAD9ALARLO0>.

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, party leaders, and their consultants -- are less able to 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 2006,¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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 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?

¹⁷ Which is here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r90z0PMnKwI>.

¹⁸ See the demise of PACs and Lobbies, an influential newsletter edited by Ed Zuckerman.

¹⁹ See supra notes 1-18.

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 Jab²⁰ and GoRemy.²¹ But just as more pop music is 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.

²⁰ Jib Jab, 'Time for Some Campaignin' (2008),
http://sendables.jibjab.com/originals/time_for_some_campaignin

²¹ GoRemy, 'Going Green with Cap and Trade' (2009),
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Si-htSSHxsE>