

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01595-1 - iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Politics in the New Media Era

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos

In the ever-changing news and information environment of the early 21st century, citizens and politicians are eagerly adapting new technologies to exercise political power. In the United States, some analysts attribute Barack Obama's success in the 2008 presidential election to the rise of social networking media.¹ Politicians abroad such as Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu adopted Obama's social networking media strategies to promote his own accomplishments and garner citizen support after seeing its success in the United States.² In 2010, Gavin Newsom, the mayor of San Francisco, became the first politician to announce his candidacy (for governor) on Twitter.³ Netroots activists and bloggers, such as those affiliated with *Daily Kos*, promote progressive candidates across the United States, solicit and coordinate financial contributions, and provide opportunities for volunteers. On the other side of the political spectrum, conservative "Tea Party" activists capitalize on these

¹ Although presidential elections are dynamic endeavors and outcomes rely on numerous factors, Talbot (2008) makes a compelling case that the Internet propelled the Obama campaign in terms of fundraising, coordinating volunteers, and generating excitement for his candidacy.

² Ethan Bronner and Noam Cohen, "Israeli Candidate Borrows a (Web) Page from Obama," *New York Times*, November 14, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/15/world/middleeast/15bibli.html>.

³ Newsom initially declared that he was running for governor, but eventually pulled out of the race and decided to run for lieutenant governor. See James Eskenazi, "Newsom Announces Lt. Gov Candidacy in Old Media Blitz. Sorry Twitter," *SF Weekly*, March 12, 2010. Retrieved from <http://blogs.sfweekly.com/thesnitch/2010/03/newsom-announces-lt-gov-candid.php>.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01595-1 - iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

strategies as well.⁴ In addition, most members of the U.S. Congress, as well as almost all U.S. candidates for any major political office, promote themselves and their accomplishments on Facebook or Twitter.

Political change around the world has also been propelled by new media tools. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have been critical organizing tools in the recent citizen protests in Northern Africa and the Middle East. These protests compelled the long-time leader of Tunisia, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, to resign and flee the country and forced Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to step down. These protests are reminiscent of the situation in Iran in 2009, in which citizen-generated videos and commentary played a crucial role in promoting and exposing the presidential election protests. In fact, in the summer of 2009, the U.S. State Department asked Twitter to postpone a network upgrade so as not to disrupt citizen activism in Iran.⁵ Yet the use of social media as a tool of citizen rebellion started before Iran. In 2007, the Burmese government tried to block Internet sites, blogs, and cell phone videos from exposing antigovernment protests to the outside world and publicizing the plight of dissidents who suffered under the harsh crackdown by the military government.⁶ Clearly, the digital age has drastically transformed the method and style of political communication and mobilization.

Yet the degree to which the new media environment fundamentally alters political outcomes and brings citizens closer to democratic ideals – such as increased levels of political participation, a more responsive government, and freedom of expression – is much less clear. Initially, many political leaders and commentators assumed that new information and communication technologies would not only increase citizen involvement in longstanding democracies but also unleash a wave of democratization around the world. Yet early empirical analyses did not uncover the results many expected. Although the quantity of news and information sources has dramatically increased worldwide, the evidence suggests diminished citizen interest in “serious” news, as well as a decline in the overall quality of news (Baum 2003; Prior 2007). In addition, several studies find

⁴ See David Wiegall, “Talking tea parties at AEI, and on C-Span, 2 p.m. ET.” *Washington Post* blog. June 9, 2010. Retrieved July 1, 2010, from <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-now/2010/06/talking-tea-parties-at-aei-and.html>.

⁵ Lev Grossman, June 17, 2009. “Iran’s Protests: Twitter, the Medium of the Moment.” *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html>.

⁶ Mark Glasser, October 8, 2007. “Can Internet, Blogs Sustain the Saffron Revolution?” Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2007/10/can-internet-blogs-sustain-the-saffron-revolution281.html>.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01595-1 - iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

that the Internet exerts little effect on mass-level political participation or citizen engagement (Bimber 2003; Galston 2002; Norris 2002).

By “new media” and “new media environment,” we refer to the rise of the Internet and other technologies that promote the immediacy of communication and information gathering. We use these terms to capture how changes in the universe of news, information, and communication have exerted an impact on how traditional news outlets cover news, how citizens participate politically, and how candidates and elected officials campaign and govern.⁷ Because changes in new technologies occur so quickly, scholars of political communication must continue to examine the transformative effects of the new media environment on politics. After all, since 2004, alone, we have witnessed the ascendance of social-networking sites, the advent of YouTube, widespread use of hand-held devices with full Internet capabilities, and numerous news websites, such as *The Huffington Post* and *Mashable*. These new media sources and tools provide citizens with new opportunities to express and organize themselves around their political interests.

Our goal in this volume, therefore, is two-fold. First, we aim to determine the degree to which recent changes in the news and information environment alter the form and substance of both domestic and foreign politics; that is, do citizens and politicians engage differently in the political arena as a result of new media? Scholars in this volume take up this question by examining topics such as how political leaders utilize Twitter and Facebook, whether YouTube plays a significant role in elections, and the Internet’s impact on political participation and attitudes in non-democratic, developing countries. Second, we seek to ascertain whether the most recent changes in the news and information environment promote democratic ideals. Contributors in this volume assess whether citizens’ political knowledge has increased or decreased over the past 20 years, whether “netroots” activism affected the debate over and outcome of health care reform in the United States, and the manner in which political leaders must navigate the new media environment to communicate

⁷ Scholars have had difficulty pinpointing a definition of what constitutes the “new media.” Media scholars Richard Davis and Diana Owen (1998, 7) comment that arriving at a definition is difficult because media in the current era are so multifaceted. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press offers a purely technological definition, originally identifying the Internet and cable news as the new media, before adding cell phone applications. In this volume, we use the term to refer both to the new technological innovations over the last 20 years and the changes that the new technologies have brought about in society.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01595-1 - iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

effectively with their constituents and the general public. Although the majority of chapters focus on politics in the United States, several chapters do address the influence of the new media environment in other areas of the world, including Europe and the Middle East. Together, the chapters allow us to provide a rich contextual assessment of the way in which the continually changing media environment influences political outcomes.

THE EVOLVING MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND ITS EFFECTS ON POLITICS

It would be difficult to overstate the rate of change the world has recently witnessed in terms of communications and information technology. Writing in the early 2000s, political communication scholar Bruce Bimber (2003, 1) asserted that “at no time in the history of American Democracy has a new set of communication and information-handling capacities been so rapidly assimilated by the political system.” Writing from a global perspective, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser (2008, 3) characterized the period between 1991 and 2008 as exhibiting “the most rapid period of technological transformation ever,” at least in terms of the delivery of information. These changes fundamentally affect the way in which citizens gather and receive news and information. In the early 1990s, the average citizen in an advanced society usually kept abreast of political events by listening to the radio, reading a newspaper, or watching a televised news broadcast. By the early 2000s, newspapers and television news broadcasts still existed, but citizens began accessing information through a myriad of new tools and sources. Newer, more sophisticated technologies continue to infiltrate the market; for example, tech-savvy news consumers now debate the costs and benefits of accessing news and information through iPads, iPhones, and Droids, just to name a few.

Beyond the Internet, the cable news industry provides around-the-clock political news and commentary. Often characterized by a partisan or ideological viewpoint, cable news programs and websites have flourished over the course of the last 20 years. Even entertainment and “soft news” programs now represent a significant source of political news. Programs such as the *The View*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* serve as important sources of political information in the United States and abroad (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009). And in this new environment, there is no such thing as missing a show; with a few clicks of the mouse, one can

easily watch the programs of one’s choosing and catch up on the events of the day.

The expansion of the Internet serves as the driving force behind the changes in the media and information environment. Certainly, a “digital divide” continues to exist, characterized by substantial discrepancies in Internet penetration exist around the world.⁸ However, as the data presented in Table I.1 make clear, all regions of the globe have experienced dramatic growth in Internet usage between 2000 and 2009, a growth that will undoubtedly continue.

TABLE I.1. *Increased Internet Use Worldwide, 2000–2009*

Region	Population (estimated 2009)	% Population Using the Internet, 2000	% Population Using the Internet, 2009	% Growth in Internet Use, 2000–9
Africa	991,002,342	0.1	8.7	1,809.8
Asia	3,808,070,503	3.1	20.1	568.8
Europe	803,850,858	14.5	53.0	305.1
Middle East	202,687,005	—	28.8	1,675.1
North America	340,831,831	33.9	76.2	140.1
Latin America	586,662,468	3.5	31.9	934.5
Oceania/Australia	34,700,201	24.6	60.8	177.0

Sources: Internet World Stats – www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm, 2009; population estimates for 2000 are from the United Nations World Population Prospects database.

Accompanying the increase in access to the Internet has been a dramatic rise in the rates and usage of Internet-based tools and activities, such as blogging, social networking, and YouTube (see Table I.2). In addition, many citizens now rely on information via mass e-mail, cell phone applications, and Web browsers.⁹ As we might expect, generational differences characterize how citizens access information. According to a 2010 Pew Center study, 72% of U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 and 29 use at least one social networking site, such as Facebook or MySpace, as compared to only 40% of women and men over the age of 30 who use these technologies.¹⁰

⁸ The disparity in communication and information technologies between developing and developed countries has become known as the “digital divide” (Norris 2001).
⁹ A Pew Research Center Report identifies the emergence of podcasts, Web browsers, and cell phones as sources of information. See “Maturing Internet News Audience – Broader than Deep,” *Pew Research Center for the People and Press*, July 30, 2006. Retrieved from <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/282.pdf>.
¹⁰ Amanda Lenhart, Kristen Purcell, Aaron Smith, and Kathryn Zickuhr, “Social Media & Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults,” *Pew Research Center for*

TABLE I.2. *Use of New and Emerging Media through 2010*

New Media Format	Startup Date	Members or Uses Per Day (in 2010)
Total Number of Blogs	March 2003 (first tracked by Technorati)	112.8 million separate blogs
LinkedIn	May 2003	70 million members
MySpace	January 2004	67 million members
Facebook	February 2004	400 million members
YouTube	December 2005	2 billion view per day
Twitter	July 2006	83.6 million monthly users 2 billion tweets per month

Note: All views and members are based on worldwide figures.
Source: For data on blogs, see Gary M. Stern, “Keeping Track of the Ever-Proliferating Number of Blogs.” Retrieved February 15, 2010, from <http://www.infotoday.com/linkup/ludo21510-stern.shtml>. For LinkedIn membership numbers, see Leena Rao, “LinkedIn Tops 70 Million Users; Includes over One Million Company Profiles,” *TechCrunch*. Retrieved June 20, 2010, from <http://techcrunch.com/2010/06/20/linkedin-tops-70-million-users-includes-over-one-million-company-profiles/>. For Facebook membership information, see <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>. For MySpace facts, see Jeremiah Owyang, “A Collection of Social Network Stats for 2010.” Retrieved January 19, 2010, from <http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2010/01/19/a-collection-of-social-network-stats-for-2010/>. For YouTube hits, see Ben Parr, “YouTube Surpasses Two Billion Video Views Daily.” Retrieved May 17, 2010, from <http://mashable.com/2010/05/17/youtube-2-billion-views/>. And for Twitter data, see Laurie Sullivan, “Twitter Acquires Analytics Startup, Supports Promoted Tweets.” Retrieved June 11, 2010, from http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=129994.

As citizens have come to rely more on online news sources, traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, national network broadcasts, and local television, have experienced concomitant declines. Table I.3 presents data regarding news habits in the United States. Between 1993 and 2008, the proportion of U.S. citizens who came to rely on online news as a regular news source grew from zero to nearly 40%. As data on newspaper readership reveals, these patterns are not unique to the United States. Between 2007 and 2009, newspaper readership in the United Kingdom fell by 25%.¹¹ Over the same time period other countries saw similar downward trends in newspaper circulation: Readership in Greece is down by 20%, Italy has seen an 18% decrease, and Canada’s circulation is down 17%.¹²

the People and Press, February 3, 2010. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx>.
¹¹ James Robinson, “UK and US See Heaviest Newspaper Circulation Declines,” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/jun/17/newspaper-circulation-oecd-report>.
¹² Ibid. Newspapers, however, are not in decline everywhere and are actually on the rise in developing countries where Internet access remains limited. See “Not All Bad News:

TABLE I.3. *Changing News and Information-Gathering Habits in the United States, 1993–2008*

	1993	1996	2000	2004	2008
<i>% of People who Regularly Watch, Read, or Listen:</i>					
Newspapers	58	50	47	42	34
Radio News	47	44	43	40	35
Cable News	–	–	33	38	39
Local TV News	77	65	56	59	52
Nightly Network News	60	42	30	34	29
Network Morning News	–	23	20	22	22
Online News	–	2	23	29	37

Notes: “Regularly” means that the medium is used daily or at least three times a week. For newspapers and radio news, the data in the 1993 column are actually 1994 data and the 1996 column data are actually from 1995.
Source: Adapted from “Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment,” *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*. Retrieved August 17, 2008, from <http://people-press.org/report/444/news-media>.

In this new information environment, engagement and participation have changed for the politically minded citizen. The citizen of 2011 texts regularly, sends pictures via cell phone, posts to Facebook daily, accesses news and political information from the Web, makes online financial contributions to political candidates, and organizes online communities on behalf of a cause. The technological revolution can even extend into the realm of voting. Citizens of Estonia became the first to cast ballots over the Internet in national elections when the government instituted e-voting in 2007.¹³ These developments represent sharp contrasts from only a few years ago, when engaged citizenship meant writing a letter to an elected official, joining an interest group, or participating in a rally.

These new technologies also affect politicians, who have generally embraced them and capitalized on their power, particularly in the United States. In the 2004 U.S. Democratic presidential primary election, for instance, Howard Dean, the relatively obscure Democratic governor of Vermont, became the first candidate to harness on the power of the Internet. He used it to tap into a grassroots, viral constituency and ultimately raised more money than his much better known opponents

Newspapers Are Thriving in Many Developing Countries,” *The Economist*, July 26, 2008, p. 80.
¹³ David Mardiste, “Estonians Will Be First to Allow Internet Votes in National Election – Technology & Media – International Herald Tribune,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2007.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01595-1 - iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

(Hindman 2007). In 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama took modern campaigning to a new level when he used new media strategies to mobilize and connect supporters; for example, his campaign developed lengthy inspirational videos that were watched by millions on YouTube,¹⁴ and he announced his vice presidential selection via text message to several million supporters' cell phones.

In addition to political campaigns, politicians now use the new media to engage in issue advocacy. The 2009 debate over health care reform in the United States serves as a prime example. Former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin used her Facebook page to charge that Democratic health care proposals would put senior citizens in front of "death panels" who would decide whether the sick and elderly would receive health care. Relying on new media technology, Palin communicated her message to her more than 500,000 Facebook "friends."¹⁵ These dubious charges, which were transmitted through an unfiltered social networking site, came to dominate news and analysis of the health care reform discussion for several weeks.

Even in nondemocratic countries, the ruling elite have adapted the new media to help maintain their authority. In Cuba, the government banned full access to the Internet so as to block potential challenges to the state, creating a limited version of the Internet that allows citizens to send text messages through a national e-mail system. Although citizens cannot access search engines or foreign websites, and even though access does not extend to individual homes, state-controlled "Intranet" cafes are increasingly prevalent.¹⁶ Other authoritarian regimes have also become quite savvy with new media. China pays a hand-picked group of citizens 50 cents for every pro-government comment they post online.¹⁷ To control Internet content the Russian government uses "web brigades," which criticize opposition leaders and praise the government.¹⁸

¹⁴ As of July 1, 2010, "Yes We Can – Barack Obama Music Video," with more than 20 million views ranked as the most watched video in the YouTube category of "politics and news."

¹⁵ For a full transcript of Palin's initial statement, which she issued on August 7, 2009, go to http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=113851103434.

¹⁶ Daniel Wilkinson, "Can the Internet Bring Change to Cuba?" *New York Review of Books* blog, July 6, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2010/jul/06/can-internet-bring-change-cuba/>.

¹⁷ Ki Mae Heussner, "Why Tyrants Like Twitter," *ABC News*, October 26, 2009. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/AheadoftheCurve/tweeting-tyrants-authoritarian-regimes-media/story?id=8917868&page=2>.

¹⁸ Web brigades are groups of government-hired Internet users. See Andrew Wilson, "Russia's Over-Managed Democracy," *European Council on Foreign Relations*,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01595-1 - iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

In addition, human rights activists suggest that Iran allowed access to Facebook – although not to other websites – before the 2009 presidential election in order to identify dissenters.¹⁹

Put simply, we would be hard-pressed to identify any region of the world that has not been touched by the new media, the rapid changes in technology, and the broader access to information these technologies and media provide.²⁰ In some countries, the new media offer citizens and politicians at the local and national levels an opportunity to engage more easily with one another. In other less democratic countries reformers and activists battle with repressive regimes as both sides try to harness the power of new technologies. However, in both democratic and nondemocratic contexts, the question remains: Do changes in the information and media environment actually promote democratic ideals?

DEMOCRACY AND THE NEW MEDIA

Initially politicians, pundits, and journalists anticipated that the Internet and new media environment would enhance democratic practices in existing democracies and loosen the reins of government in authoritarian regimes. As early as 1989, U.S. President Ronald Reagan predicted, “The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip.”²¹ In 1999, presidential candidate George W. Bush remarked, “Imagine if the Internet took hold in China. Imagine how freedom would spread.”²² That same year, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan pronounced, “With their power to promote openness and transparency,

December 4, 2007. Retrieved from http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_wilson_on_russia_election_results. See also Joshua Kurlantzick, “The Web Doesn’t Spread Freedom,” *Newsweek*, May 10, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/04/30/the-internet-helps-build-democracies-oh-no-it-doesn-t.print.html>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The United Nations has actively sought to bridge the digital divide, meeting with some success through the UN Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Task Force (see <http://unictaskforce.org>). In addition, projects such as One Laptop Per Child aim to decrease the gap by developing low-cost, low-power connected laptops to children in developing countries (see <http://www.laptop.org>).

²¹ Reagan is quoted in Sheila Rule, “Reagan Gets a Red Carpet from British,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1989. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/14/world/reagan-gets-a-red-carpet-frombritish.html>.

²² Bush at Phoenix, Arizona GOP Debate on December 7, 1999, quoted in Lokman Tsui, “Internet Opening up China: Fact or Fiction?” Paper presented at Media in Transition Conference, Boston, May 10–12, 2002. Retrieved from <http://web.mit.edu/cms/Events/mit2/Abstracts/LOKMANTSUI.pdf>.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01595-1 - iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

telecoms are leaving tyrants, polluters and ineffective governments fewer places to hide.”²³ More recently, Tom Brokaw, the legendary anchor of the *NBC Nightly News*, asserted that bloggers represented the “democratization of the news.”²⁴ And U.S. Senator Mark Warner, a former telecom executive, contended that bloggers can “potentially creat[e] a new public square for democracy” (Davis 2009, 5).

This is not to say that political actors and media personalities are not cognizant of the costs associated with the power of the Internet. In speaking to a group of journalism students at New York University, Brian Williams, the current anchor of the *NBC Nightly News*, famously condemned bloggers as newsmakers: “Now I’m up against a guy named Vinny in an efficiency apartment in the Bronx who hasn’t left the efficiency apartment in two years.” Confirming Williams’s criticism, his own blog – *The Daily Nightly* – at one point received fewer daily hits than the website *tvnewser.com*, which was started by a 19-year-old Towson State University student.²⁵ Overall, however, most pronouncements about the Internet and new media environment’s democratizing potential have been cast in general and positive terms.

Matthew Hindman, in *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2009), argues that evaluations of the democratizing role of the Internet depend on how democratization is defined. He notes that many commentators adopt an “Internet is good” perspective and therefore assume that it enhances the quality of democracy without identifying exactly how (Hindman 2009, 5). Indeed, general pronouncements of the positive influence of the Internet and digital age are difficult to refute normatively. However, the empirical evidence provided by political scientists who gauge improvement in democratic practices by looking at specific outcomes – including a more informed citizenry, increased political participation, greater freedom of expression in the marketplace of ideas, and the ease with which political leaders and organizations can mobilize citizens on behalf of an electoral candidate or political cause – is decidedly mixed.

²³ ITU Telecom Opening Ceremony, October 9, 1999. Retrieved from http://www.itu.int/telecom-wt99/press_service/information_for_the_press/press_kit/speeches/annan_ceremony.html.

²⁴ Brokaw is quoted in Julian Guthrie, “Fellow Anchors Defend Rather on Forged Papers,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 3, 2004. Retrieved from http://articles.sfgate.com/2004-10-03/news/17450092_1_anchor-seat-tom-brokaw-media-critic-ken-auletta.

²⁵ See Kristen O’Gorman, “Brian Williams Weighs in on the New Media,” *We Want Media*, April 6, 2007. Retrieved from <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/wewantmedia/node/487>. See also “Why Brian Williams’ Blog is Striking,” *cyberjournalist.net*, August 25, 2005. Retrieved from <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/002840.php>.