

Book Review: News on the Internet: Information and Citizenship in the 21st Century

by Blog Admin

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*In **News on the Internet: Information and Citizenship in the 21st Century**, David Tewksbury and Jason Rittenberg focus on some of the most pressing questions posed in the field of Communication Studies today, shedding light on aspects of news consumption and the democratic involvement of audiences. **Kally Zarali** finds the book absorbing and a must-read for anyone looking to explore the complex relationship between media and democracy in the 21st century.*



News on the Internet: Information and Citizenship in the 21st Century. David Tewksbury and Jason Rittenberg. Oxford University Press. April 2012.

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News consumption and production have always been important elements of democratic life, and the content, distribution, and reception of news by audiences can be used as an indicator of the way democracy functions. *News on the Internet, Information and Citizenship in the 21st Century* is a practical guide to understanding the not always harmonious relationship between media and political communication in the US, in which the authors explore the potential impact of changes in the digital world on the democratization of the media landscape. Using established media theories and presenting a wide range of recent research data, [David Tewksbury](#) and Jason Rittenberg, from the University of Illinois, compare various news outlets and describe the changes that have occurred not only in terms of the content (amount and quality of information produced, news agendas, platforms, distribution), but also of the users and the way they respond to all these changes.



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The authors consider changes in models of political communication as a result of the shift online, which now seem to be turning from top-down to bottom-up or cut-across, considering the nature of the new medium and the increasingly active role of the audience. As underlined in chapter 3, there is space for information democratization; the changes in the news agendas and the audience involvement are key to this process. As far as the news agenda is concerned, nobody doubts that online news is broader than TV-based or newspaper-based reporting. But is this news different, when a traditional media outlet, for example the CNN, goes online? The writers discern minimal content changes in the case of mainstream online media, which they describe in general as homogeneous. However, they do see a change in alternative news outlets, such as the political blogs, where there is room for more news items that come directly from the audience and that would rarely appear in the traditional reporting. Taking into consideration that the Internet is characterized mainly by fragmentation and segmentation, the writers assume that in contrast to traditional media, an agenda heterogeneity on the Internet seems very likely, although the homogeneity of the traditional news agenda remains an important element.

As far as the role of the audience in the democratization of the news is concerned, the writers recognize its importance in shaping the news agenda in two main ways: firstly, through elements of interaction and

selectivity encouraged in the digital world, for example the distribution of news content through Twitter; and secondly, the undertaking by users of reporting the news themselves. In this reviewer's opinion, news blogs are certainly a means of democratization of the news production and distribution, and they could well play a significant role in the formation of the news agendas. However, one should not ignore that many of them are often characterized by political bias and lack of quality. What is more, as the writers claim, but for the shift in many aspects, the news agenda remains to a great extent product of the traditional players: the media and the political/economic elites.

Another important aspect examined in the book is the fragmentation and polarization of the audience in the digital world. As it is described extensively in chapter 7, online news outlets tend to specialize their content in order to attract audiences with specific interests, and thus advertisement. Such a fragmentation though, in a world where such an abundant amount of information is dispersed online, could lead to the fragmentation of public- affairs knowledge, as well as to opinion polarization. Although the writers point out that the lack of relevant research does not allow for definite conclusions on the potential extent of such a fragmentation or polarization, one should consider the negative aspects of such a phenomenon: more specialization, less overall picture about the public agenda and partisan views could endanger the democratization process in the media.

Overall however, the prospect of information democratization is still promising. As outlined in chapter 8, the process of democratizing of news has to do with the increasing involvement of private citizens in the creation, distribution, exhibition, and curation of civically relevant information. So far, we are noticing an important change to that direction. But is this enough to make our societies better? The writers do not rush to rejoice about the future of this process. A large portion of the public continues to abstain from any political involvement and has no interest in getting or sharing information that could make a difference in the public life. An example lies in the content distributed through Facebook, most of which is connected with entertainment. Furthermore, information democratization is not a process that will proceed without impediments. According to the authors, significant factors such as traditional media, economic forces, or even regulatory forces could work against this evolution. Interestingly, the authors highlight in chapter 2 the need to address the digital divide with public policies, so that the dangers it holds for the quality of democracy are eliminated.

So, is the Internet good or bad for democracy after all? The writers resist falling into the trap of easy claims or predictions. Underlining many points that still need to be thoroughly researched, they recognize that the Internet provides audiences with a great deal of control over the news and promotes the information democratization. Overall a useful handbook for undergraduate Mass Media and Communication students, but it has the potential to also appeal to general readers since it provides a short but extensive overview of the developments of the last decades in the field.

Kally Zarali is a PhD student in Journalism and Mass Media at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in the field of External Policy and the Media. Her special interests focus on new media and identity issues. Currently, she is researching the expression of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the Greek blogosphere. She also works as a journalist for the Greek Public Television, ERT, covering international news, academic and scientific issues. [Read more reviews by Kally.](#)