Introduction

The adage that you never can step into the same river twice applies to any attempt to describe the current state of the Internet. The Internet's information flow, augmented by ever increasing rainfalls of data, constantly alters people's knowledge of public affairs and more broadly the political relations of citizens within and between societies, much as a river's flow constantly alters the depth of its channels and the topography of the surrounding shore. *The Prospect of Internet Democracy* aims to draw back from the shore and to discern how the flow is altering the political landscape. What changes has the Internet wrought, how have these changes affected the conduct of democratic politics, and what are their likely consequences for democratic politics in the future?

Politics comprises one of the key avenues through which people define themselves and their cultures. Yet politics itself is continually re-defined through human interaction and cultural influences. Advances in digital technologies affect the transactional process between politics and culture. Indeed, numerous scholarly and popular observers contend that politics has ceased to be local and boundary-centered. It is now global and universal. Moreover, citizens have become active consumers and "shoppers" of political commodities rather than passive recipients of political goods. Governmental bureaucracies in turn have assumed more "customer service" orientations in order to satisfy their citizens' demands. The concept of democratic citizenship is also changing from its nation-centered roots to a more transcendent "Globalism." As such, the Internet holds promise for bringing about a broader political community with increased international solidarity, and greater human empowerment.

Others, however, contend that this promise is unlikely to be fulfilled. These observers argue that established powers (e.g., governmental officials, CEOs of multinational corporations, media moguls, leaders of mainstream political parties, interest groups and religious organizations) have captured key elements of the Internet. They "own" its backbone, they determine how citizens can access the Net, and they monitor citizens' usage. They also maintain a great deal of influence over the "independent" rule-making bodies and the protocols that all users must follow. In short, the Internet provides them with another tool that they can use to direct and control politics. As a consequence these observers expect that the Internet will lead neither to significantly greater empowerment of the people nor to significant furtherance of democratic politics.

Scholarly and popular observers who hold conflicting visions of the Internet's likely impact on democratic citizenship tend to talk past one another. Those who remain optimistic generally see the Web 2.0's interactive and broadband features

as providing the information and communication technologies (ICTs) necessary for professional public administrators to assure efficient delivery of governmental goods and services to citizens in accordance with transparent rules and regulations. Elected officials and bureaucrats can employ these ICTs to exchange relevant information with their peers as well as with the citizens individually or in groups. As a bonus these exchanges cut costs by reducing duplication of records and services among agencies and increase satisfaction by giving administrators better feedback regarding the effectiveness of the policies and services. Governmental services can be rendered with the efficiency and panache of much admired customer oriented business models. Although this vision emphasizes aspects of "e-governance" over a more participatory vision of "e-democracy," advocates point out that citizens participate indirectly in rule-making through feedback to administrators as well as periodic election of representatives who determine the policies and oversee how administrators implement the rules and regulations.

Critics disparage this bureaucratic e-democracy model as barely changing the status quo. In their view, the model ignores the crucial concern that modern democracies ought to encourage citizens to employ new ICTs to deliberate and determine which policies and services governments *should* provide. Using ICTs to encourage greater citizen participation in deciding policies would be the very embodiment of robust political engagement. If citizens of a democracy are supposed to exercise the ultimate authority to choose and to dismiss those who decide the great political issues, shouldn't their roles in governance be more than those of customers? Businesses, after all, encourage customers to satisfy their private demands and those of persons or groups they hold dear. They generally do not ask them to consider how their private transactions might help or hinder resolving broader problems that affect the quality of life—perhaps even the survival—of their society as a whole. For these critics little will change unless or until democratic theorists figure out how to use ICTs successfully to implement deliberative policy processes in which all interested citizens can readily participate.

This book examines the empirical and philosophical arguments that engage the strengths and/or weaknesses of these two visions. It also looks at the extent to which changes in ICTs like those associated with Web 2.0 require that western democratic theorists revise not only the 18th century institutions associated with democratic governance, but also the philosophical assumptions that those institutions were designed to implement. Modern democratic political institutions in the western tradition, for instance, incorporate philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment. These include faith in citizens' ability to think logically and rationally, and the belief that they will exercise their reason for the general good, not merely for their own selfish gain. In a globalized world where citizens of non-western democratic tradition far outnumber those of established democracies, and where citizens of western democracies increasingly prefer flashy multimedia presentations based on Internet ICTs to complex logical arguments based upon printed words, the assumptions of the Enlightenment may be obsolete. Similarly, in a global community where governmental, corporate, and other interest groups, as well as clever—and often

nefarious—individuals can monitor virtually any citizen's activities, democratic assumptions about personal privacy may need revision.

While many positions lie between these opposing visions regarding the distribution of political power, each encapsulates moral and empirical considerations. For instance, persistent socioeconomic inequalities within and among polities produce differential rates—digital divides—that hold back poor and otherwise disadvantaged citizens from access to and adoption of ICTs. These inequalities are compounded by diverse societal norms that hinder democratic deliberation and participation, such as traditional dominance of men over women regarding public affairs, or of well established political, economic, ethnic and religious groups' resources and abilities to use ICTs to mobilize their members and to sway public opinion. Another hindrance stems from the ongoing replacement of traditional mass media that provided common sources of general information and viewpoints about public affairs with more narrowly focused partisan media like Newscorp's Fox News Channel, *The Wall Street Journal*, MSNBC or *Al Jazeera* or even with ideological forums like Townhall.com or Huffingtonpost.com. Given the propensity of busy users to prefer short message services (such as Twitter), video clips, instant messaging via social networks and the like to traditional discourse, the public commons of the future may consist mostly of audio/video clips augmented with graphic designs and PowerPoint outlines. The ability to read or to write a clearly articulated logical argument, much less a scholarly essay, may soon become a quaint reminder of the ancient pre-digital era.

In fairness, even though the popular inception of the Internet stems only from the introduction of graphic browsers in 1994, the exponential growth of users and types of usage, the scale of technological innovation, and the rapidity of events threaten to render social scientific observations—let alone generalizations—outdated before they can be published in print. It follows that researchers, journalists and other social observers need to augment books, magazines, newspapers and other printed publications with digitized media that include text, audio, video, and graphics. Nevertheless, we must remember that oratory and graphics originated with, and still remain the fundamental means of mass communication for illiterate and semiliterate peoples. Their content cannot (as yet) replicate or replace the complex properties of written language.

We employ several strategies to meet these research problems. First, we assume that most readers are familiar with the Internet's basic characteristics and have some experience using it. Second, rather than overburden readers with multitudes of citations, we point out major sources—online and offline—that compile and update the latest empirical and theoretical social scientific studies of politics and the Internet. Third, we utilize the observations, interpretations and generalizations of researchers who preceded us in order to discern these patterns. Fourth, we rely upon classical theories of democracy to inform and structure our own interpretations, theories and expectations about the prospects of democratic governance.

We invite readers to draw back from the minutiae of everyday usage and join our quest to discern behavioral patterns within an ever-changing online environment.