

Ricke, LaChrystal D. *The Impact of YouTube on U.S. Politics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014. vii + 209 pages. Hardcover, \$85.00.

Focusing exclusively on US politics, the author, communications studies expert LaChrystal D. Ricke, uses contemporary sociological theory and an array of real-life examples to illustrate how YouTube plays a vital role in modern American politics. The main argument of the book is that YouTube has enhanced fundraising campaigns, political advertising, supporter mobilization, civic engagement, and political knowledge. YouTube enables a variety of social actors to perform numerous political activities in order to meet their needs and facilitate a more vibrant democracy. Ricke argues that YouTube blurs the boundaries between politicians, audiences, and mass media, creating an equally accessible and wide-reaching political space for all users. The book explores the ways that mass and social media converge to create unique new opportunities for interaction between politicians and the public. Moreover, the architecture of openness on YouTube has significantly reduced “gatekeeping” and “agenda-setting” from political elites and the mass media, altering the balance of power in American politics towards increased amounts of civic participation and diversity within the public sphere. The book builds upon a view of the public sphere and deliberative democracy reminiscent of the work of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, which is discussed in a clear and concise fashion. The author contends that platforms like YouTube aid in creating a more “participatory democracy,” where the lowered spatial, temporal, and financial costs to political participation is greatly increasing the amount public engagement and quality of political discourse in the United States.

Ricke argues that the presence of highly interactive websites such as YouTube create new opportunities for members of the formerly passive mass media audience to transform into an active one by sharing information, creating information, and challenging claims being made in the mass media. She uses the jointly hosted 2007 CNN-YouTube political debate as an example of how candidates and journalists have lost their position of power to set the public agenda within public discourse. During this event, candidates were expected to answer questions posed directly by viewers. While the author rightfully notes that there were difficulties with this event (CNN’s omission of questions about marijuana legalization despite it being the most common topic, candidates often dodging questions posed to them, and a lack of civility from audience contributors), formats such as these create opportunities for new voices to be heard in ways unimaginable to previous generations of Americans.

YouTube is viewed as transforming the way politicians communicate with the public. Because politicians are able to use YouTube to eliminate the “gatekeeping” function of the mass media, they are able to define terms and manage impressions in their own words, and to influence the public directly without needing to solicit coverage from news organizations. The author gives the example of how presidential candidates such as Ron Paul were able to maintain relevance during the 2012 election without receiving much coverage in mass media outlets, or even inclusion in televised debates. The author also looks at how the presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012 contained numerous examples of candidates using YouTube to make personal connections with the public, craft a persona, raise money, challenge their opponents, influence the public agenda, and mobilize supporters to take action. The use of YouTube is not limited solely to winning elections, however. Ricke also examines ways that politicians have discovered how to govern through social media, developing policy support and managing public opinion via direct, unfiltered communication on YouTube. The author also investigates how politicians use

YouTube either to broadcast to a mass audience or to engage in “microtargeting,” in which specially crafted messages are disseminated to specific groups of interest.

Nevertheless, YouTube can also provide checks and balances on politicians. For example, videos posted by politicians are open to responses from viewers, where any member of the audience can directly challenge the validity of claims. Spaces such as these, according to the author, are vital in a deliberative democracy, and are not under the sole control of any actor that would hold the power to censor or silence opposition. YouTube fosters more transparency and authenticity from politicians, as their ability to manage imagery and control information is greatly reduced by new communicative technologies.

In general, books about politics and the internet run along a continuum of optimistic, positive assessments of the internet leading to a better democracy (“utopian viewpoint”) versus others claiming that it creates more polarization, public ignorance, political apathy, and public surveillance from ruling elites (“dystopian viewpoint”). This book leans heavily towards the former, continuously exploring examples of how YouTube has improved American politics and how it is a strongly democratizing force. The author mentions, but understates, the dystopian elements found in online forums like YouTube. For example, Ricke briefly comments on how people engage in selective exposure to political information when going online, and how this can lead to polarization. Likewise, the author notes the lack of civility in online content (and how commonly it was found in the research) but does not view it as an inherent flaw of the medium. My only negative criticism of this book is its overly optimistic tone. In my opinion, there should be more of a balance between these positive and negative aspects that often occur simultaneously in order to give a more accurate depiction of YouTube’s impact on political discourse in the United States.

However, I feel that this book has many more positives than negatives, and recommend that others read it. It is a well-researched book that contains numerous useful illustrative examples. Using predominantly qualitative research and exploratory in scope, this book is well-written, straightforward, clear, enjoyable to read, and informative. Within academia, I see this book as being very useful for a graduate-level media and politics seminar. Students that are becoming better acquainted with the theories of Jürgen Habermas will gain from the various illustrative applications of his concepts in the real-life contemporary settings of a modern-day democracy.

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