UCLA
InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title
Review: *Information Politics on the Web* by Richard Rogers

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z3804xk

Journal
InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 1(2)

ISSN
1548-3320

Author
Lane, Kevin

Publication Date
2005-06-21

DOI
10.5070/D412000551

Peer reviewed

Information Politics on the Web by Richard Rogers. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004. 216 pp. ISBN 0-262-18242-4

Will the World Wide Web incline towards a utopian egalitarianism or will it succumb to the inexorable forces of economic—and perhaps ideological— concentration now dominating the trajectory of traditional media? Richard Rogers explores this question with qualified success in *Information Politics on the Web*. Rogers illustrates the Web's power to both adjudicate and influence front line media skirmishes between activists and the mainstream press. His new-technology perspective ironically sheds important light on the nature of both new and old media, but the transparent teleology driving this work undercuts the power of his message.

Rogers fears that the Web will become nothing more than an online "evening news," (p. 8)—an essentially monolithic amalgamation of views driven primarily by the well-oiled public relations engines of corporate and governmental interests. Indeed, the strength of *Information Politics* is Rogers' analysis of the Web as media, which he breaks down into back-end and front-end information politics. The back-end encompasses search engine practices such as ranking results and, as Rogers capably describes, these practices are evidence of how the inherent market forces of capitalism inexorably shape the Web into an online version of the evening news. Money buys eyeballs on television broadcasts and search engine rankings with equal ease. As a result, messages on both media are skewed towards the beliefs of moneyed interests.

The heart of the book, however, is Rogers' analysis of front-end information politics: how truth relates to the dominant online view of events. Rogers reviews four political instruments he has developed for juxtaposing "evening news" versions of events with differing—in this book, chiefly progressive—perspectives. The four instruments are the Lay Decision Support System, the Issue Barometer, the Web Issue Index of Civil Society, and the Election Issue Tracker. The Lay Decision Support System explores the gap between reality and official accounts of an issue. The Issue Barometer gauges the freshness, debate intensity, and international prevalence of an issue. The Web Issue Index of Civil Society estimates which issues are gaining or losing prominence over time. And lastly, the Election Issue Tracker measures the degree to which election issues have penetrated mainstream media.

Rogers' most effective use of these quantitative tools is his employment of the Lay Decision Support System to analyze the "collision space between official and unofficial accounts of reality" (p. 35) about Viagra. Rogers demonstrates that the reality of the Viagra culture departs dramatically from the pre-digested marketing pablum generated by its corporate backers and echoed by mainstream media. The reality of Viagra, Rogers discovers, is not centrally about older

heterosexual men. Rather, it is about a spectrum of people—including young clubbers, women, gays, and of course, older men—as well as animals such as the giant panda. The point is not that Viagra has a richer, more complex place in society than previously suggested, but rather that Rogers' online methodologies can show that the "evening news" version of Viagra misrepresents reality.

Rogers positions his work as merging Castells' "crisis of democracy" with Introna and Nissenbaum's political analysis of search engines. He weaves an intriguing analysis of web epistemologies, but his unabashed political views detract from his story. A typical example is his pejorative dismissal of Boston University anthropology professor Peter Wood's analysis of the G-8 summit as emblematically "unreasonabl[e]" (p. 103). Because Rogers himself fails to explain what part of Wood's analysis he finds unreasonable, one must assume Wood is guilty primarily of defending globalization, a position Rogers clearly opposes. Based on the intrinsic arguments he offers against Wood's views, Rogers' rebuke seems both off the mark and tangential to the chapter's discussion. The Wood example reflects Rogers' general embrace of progressive politics to the exclusion of other viewpoints. Indeed, the disdain for mainstream media which underlies the entire book is a thinly veiled rebuke of the entire political spectrum—both left and right—that actually holds power. Where Rogers is able to separate out his political leanings, his arguments are notably more effective.

The global village benefits from fresh perspectives on the new media landscape. A key benefit of understanding web-based media is laying bare old media to synthesize improvements in new information genres. Rogers demonstrates the power of his tools of analysis for accomplishing this objective in comparing the online and offline versions of the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*. He capably demonstrates the vacuity of online citations in the print version in contrast to the abundance of relevant links representing a diversity of opinions in the Web version of *Der Standard*. Offline readers are directed to the sterile home pages of officialdom while online viewers are provided with links to substantive information from multiple perspectives. By demonstrating the capabilities of the Web for promoting pluralist debate, Rogers importantly exposes the monolithic shallowness of "evening news."

In the end, *Information Politics on the Web* succeeds in two of three areas. Rogers fails in making a compelling case for the progressive information politics he weaves throughout the book. However, he succeeds in introducing four new methodological instruments that, although understandably primitive in the nascent stages of online media, chart new territory in the effort to understand the dynamics of the Web as media. Finally, and most importantly, Rogers also succeeds in framing the Web as a potential egalitarian counterbalance to the

highly mediated news accounts that dominate today's information distribution channels.

Reviewer

Kevin Lane is a first year doctoral student in UCLA's department of Information Studies. His interests lie in the intersection of politics and information.