

Internet activism produces ideologically thin forms of activism, and whether it can sustain activist involvement over time. Do the reduced costs of e-activism help cultivate decentralized social movement leadership?

This is a well-researched and important study that draws from a nuanced understanding of the social movement literature, and it raises some important questions about how technological change affects our basic assumptions and concepts. For instance, the authors argue that we need to rethink concepts like “collective action,” since e-tactics are both collective and private actions. Since co-presence of activists is not required for Web-based collective action, our research and theorizing may be more aptly labeled “protest” rather than “social movement” studies.

My only disappointments were with the book(s) these authors didn’t write. Since the research ends in 2006, the authors have not explored how social media such as Facebook have affected political organizing. In addition, much more can be said about the interface of technology, social change mobilization, and identity. For instance, I would have liked to see these authors relate their findings on identity and individualized forms of activism to Paul Lichteman’s notion of “personalist politics” (*The Search for Political Community: American Activists Reinventing Commitment*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) or to Robert Wuthnow’s exploration of how modern institutions affect social ties (*Loose Connections: Joining Together in America’s Fragmented Communities*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). A discussion of the implications of economic inequalities and demographic variation in Internet access as well as a consideration of the transnational dimensions of Web-based activism would be welcome additions to the conversation this book has begun.

In sum, with this path-breaking assessment of how technology impacts our thinking about movements, Earl and Kimport have laid the foundation for some fascinating new areas of research. The most-profound work will carry on the quest to discover whether and how changes in political action repertoires are linked to broader social and institutional as well as technological changes. I hope to soon see new work that expands the lens of this book to consider how global-level forces are implicated in these changes, including how technological and political changes affect both states and political mobilization.

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**Mass Informed Consent: Evidence on Upgrading Democracy with Polls and New Media** by Adam F. Simon. Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011. 238 pp. \$49.95.

Adam F. Simon believes that “sample surveys are the finest democratic technology yet devised...” (p. 1). If pollsters faithfully convey an issue and present

alternatives for the public to judge, we can have “mass informed consent,” the title and key phrase of the book. Polls provide, in the author’s view, one person one vote, unlike most other forms of influence on government policies.

The book’s underlying assumption is that the public, if adequately informed about alternative government actions to solve an important problem, will usually make rational decisions, rather than being misled irrationally by what Simon views as propaganda. Walter Lippmann and John Dewey appear as opposing symbols throughout the book, one as an advocate of decisions by elites, the other urging input from ordinary citizens.

After laying out his assumptions, but before attempting to show the rationality of the public, Simon provides a whirlwind tour of polling, the statistical tools needed to analyze polls, and relevant ideas about public opinion. In a hundred pages, he briefly considers the importance of random sampling, internal and external validity, correlation, significance testing, multiple regression with use of residuals, Columbia versus Michigan approaches to vote determination, cognitive consistency, the ideas of V.O. Key, Robert Lane, Philip Converse, and John Zaller, survey non-response, question wording problems, the value of studying attitude trends over time, and much else. The author’s assumption seems to be that his readers start with little or no background, but that his book provides essential knowledge along the way. I am doubtful that naive readers can follow all of this, and the book will be best read by those who have some grounding in both political science and statistics.

Simon’s main analysis comes at the end of the book with an examination of the George W. Bush administration’s justifications for the 2003 decision to invade Iraq, and a similar analysis regarding Bill Clinton’s 1993 health care proposal. Considering the first here, he shows that using 250 poll questions asked over the year prior to the Iraq invasion indicated public support for military action to be higher when strong rationales were claimed (for example, evidence of weapons of mass destruction [WMD]) and lower when the rationale was weak (for example, no WMD reported by inspectors). Thus, he finds that the public did not accept the administration’s pressure to back the invasion in any simple way, but weighed the strength of the different arguments offered.

This leads Simon to conclude that responsibility for the war cannot be traced to an unsophisticated public, nor to the inadequacy of the polls. The conclusion may be hard to accept, however, since he also reports that repeated administration of a general question on using “military action” (undefined) “to force Saddam Hussein from power” never dropped below 56 percent support over the year preceding the 2003 invasion (p. 132), and thus could readily be taken by the President to indicate backing for his decision. Of course, “military action” in 1993 also received considerable support from elite intellectuals and Senators, to their later regret. So the ghosts of neither Dewey nor Lippmann can claim vindication with regard to the decision to invade Iraq.

The author does not consider how well the public could *evaluate* the truth of any of the various claims in polls. This kind of difficult judgment was not

explored in the polls he uses, so the question of public rationality seems more complex than he implies. However, for this reader, the more interesting and valuable result of Simon's analysis is different: his evidence that a motley lot of poll questions, with much variation in question content (though perhaps not in format) could be shown to provide a kind of unidimensional scale similar in an important respect to scales developed many years ago by Emory Bogardus, and, more formally, by Louis Guttman. Further consideration and testing of this finding seems to me well worth pursuing.

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**Niche News: The Politics of News Choice** by Natalie Jomini Stroud.  
*New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. 272 pp. \$24.95.*

Discussions by politicians and cable pundits about the existence and impact of media bias are fleeting, fevered, and often fact-free. Natalie Stroud's *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* offers something completely different—a carefully reasoned and documented analysis of the relationships among political preferences, media choices, and political actions and opinions. By examining what she terms partisan selective exposure, the tendency of people to choose news sources whose content matches their own political views, Stroud provides a reader with an excellent overview of what research in political science today suggests about the operation and impact of partisan media sources.

Stroud starts by going through the theoretical literature on why people might or might not prefer to get information that differs from their current set of beliefs. Honing in on information that deals with politics, she shows that many people view news about current affairs through the lens of partisanship. Using data from multiple sources, such as national election studies, television ratings, web-enabled consumer surveys, and lab experiments with media choices, she establishes that political predispositions are a ready predictor of the types of news outlets people seek out. Noting that this holds true across media, she finds that “Conservatives and Republicans are more likely to read newspapers endorsing a Republican presidential candidate, browse conservative-leaning magazines, listen to conservative talk radio, watch Fox News, and access conservative Web sites” (p. 169). The same pattern holds for liberals and Democrats, who seek out news sources that agree with their world views.

While the pattern of partisans seeking out niches that match their ideology is clear, the impacts of this phenomenon are less certain. Stroud points out that the “use of likeminded media” (p. 170) does not appear to generate more interest in politics by viewers or reduce their knowledge of presidential candidates. She shows through her work research and the results of others that partisan selective exposure does have a strong relationship with levels of political participation, the decision to commit to a given political candidate,