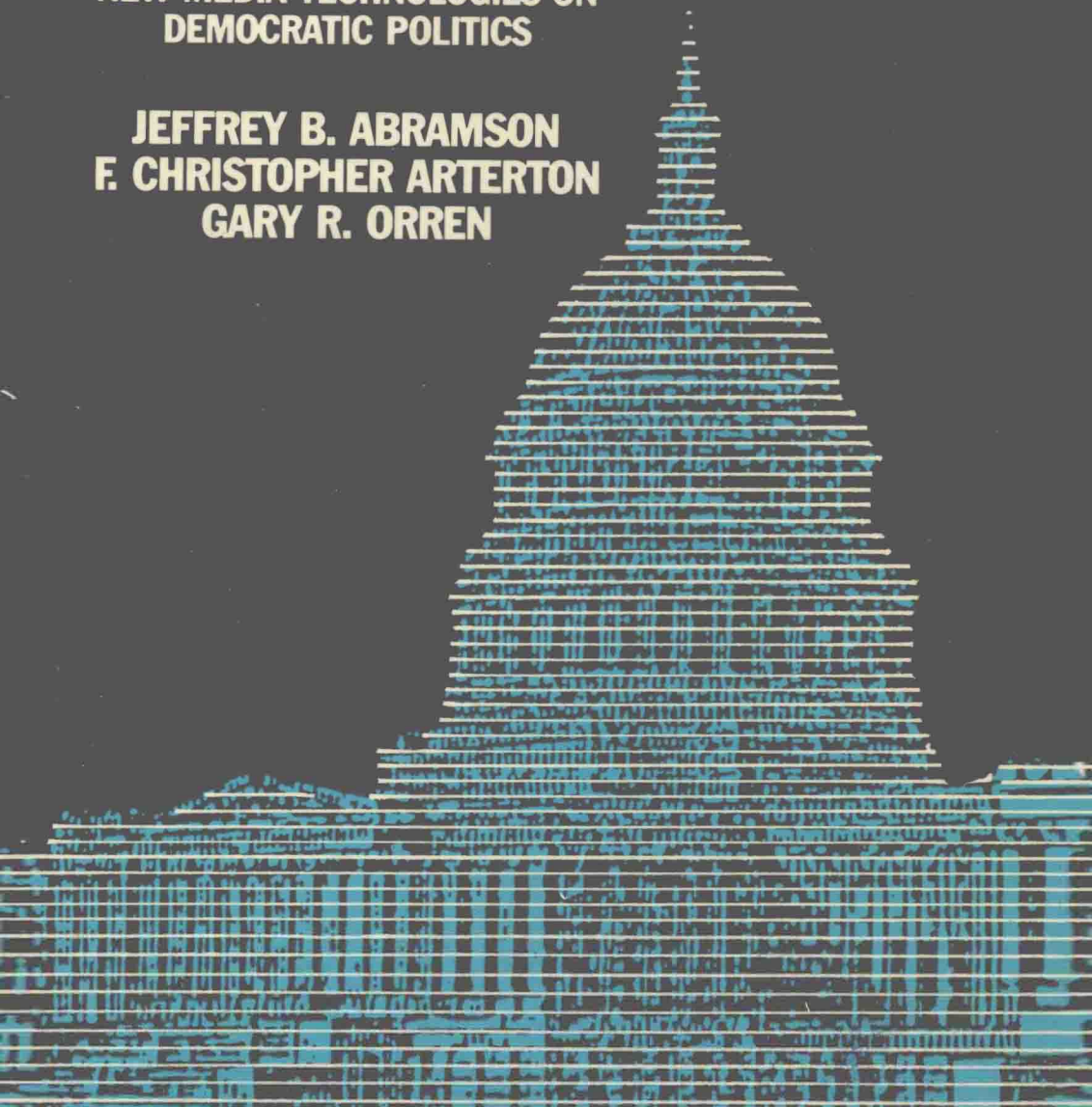# THE ELECTRONIC COMMONWEALTH

THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES ON DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

**JEFFREY B. ABRAMSON
F. CHRISTOPHER ARTERTON
GARY R. ORREN**

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ELECTRONIC

COMMONWEALTH

The Impact of New Media Technologies on Democratic Politics

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The Electronic Commonwealth

To Our Wives

Jackie, Janet, and Merle

and to Our Children

Sarah, Anna, Cameron, Jamison, Meredith, and Jonathan

FOREWORD

OVER the past several decades, changes in communications technologies have occurred at an ever-increasing pace. The introduction of personal computers, satellites, and electronic mail and telephone networks have substantially altered the ways in which we receive and transmit information. One of the fundamental questions arising from these developments is how the new means of communication have affected our democracy: the conduct of campaigns and elections, governance by officials, and the ways in which citizens participate in their government.

To examine these questions, in 1982 the Institute of Politics at Harvard University received a grant from the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation and undertook a three-year study of new communications technologies, public policy, and democratic values. Three eminent scholars were invited to design and conduct the research and to author the work resulting from it—Professors Jeffrey Abramson, Christopher Arterton, and Gary Orren.

A faculty study group, of which I was the chair, composed of scholars and practitioners from the fields of politics and the media, acted as advisors to the project, helping to shape the work in its initial stages and reviewing the authors' works-in-progress as they went along. The membership of the faculty study group included:

Daniel Bell, Henry Ford II Professor of Social Sciences, Harvard University

Stephen J. Breyer, judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, and lecturer on law, Harvard Law School

Les Brown, senior vice president, editorial development, *Channels of Communication,* New York

John Deardourff, chairman of the board, Bailey, Deardourff & Associates, Inc., McLean, Va.

Henry Geller, director, Center for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C.

David Gergen, editor, *U.S. News & World Report*

Winthrop Knowlton, president, Knowlton Associates, Inc., Cambridge, Mass., and former director, Center for Business and Government, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Richard Levine, vice president, Information Services Group, Dow Jones & Company, Inc., Princeton, N.J.

Jonathan Moore, ambassador-at-large and coordinator for refugee affairs, U.S. Department of State, and former director, Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Roger Mudd, special correspondent and essayist, *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*

W. Russell Neuman, assistant professor of political science and director, Research Program on Communications Policy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Richard M. Neustadt, consultant, Private Satellite Network, Inc., New York

Michael Sandel, professor of government, Harvard University

Professor Ithiel de Sola Pool of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was a member of the group at its outset. His death was a loss not only to this project but to all who work in the field he helped to pioneer.

The members of the faculty study group contributed a great deal to this work, and the authors and I are grateful to them. The particular contributions of one member, however, need to be mentioned. As director of the Institute of Politics, Jonathan Moore was responsible for nurturing the original idea of this research. His vision and commitment developed the outlines for the inquiry and the funding from the Markle Foundation without which this work would never have been undertaken. He did this within the context of a larger vision, the development of a Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. That center, named for journalist Joan Shorenstein Barone, was dedicated in the fall of 1986. Finally, I wish to thank Wendy O'Donnell, the member of the Institute's staff without whose research and administrative skills this project could not have succeeded.

JOSEPH S. NYE, JR.
Institute of Politics
Cambridge, Massachusetts

PREFACE TO THE
PAPERBACK EDITION

EVEN AS *The Electronic Commonwealth* first appeared in print, the 1988 presidential campaign was providing fresh evidence of the new media's political influence. Two developments in particular during the 1988 election add to the case we make in this book for the growing impact of new communications technologies on American politics.

First and foremost, the 1988 campaign was noteworthy for the leading role televised political advertisements played in defining the agenda of public debate. As many commentators have pointed out, the ads were nasty and negative on both sides and contributed to widespread public dissatisfaction with the conduct of the candidates. But what was new about the ads was not so much their negativity as their reactivity. The old preplanned ads-in-the-can strategy gave way to spots so timely that they were literally responsive to the latest shifts in poll data or to the opponent's ads still being aired. The result was that the art of campaigning became more data-driven than ever, as both sides calibrated their advertising campaigns according to the nightly soundings of the tracking polls. The result also was that the real "debate" between the candidates in 1988 was conducted through thirty-second television spots, with attack quickly provoking counterattack.

A host of new video production and distribution technologies have gone into quickening the pace of political advertising. On the production side, these include use of video tape (reducing the number of "takes" necessary by permitting the director to see immediately the results of a shot); hand-held camcorders (allowing quality shots of the candidate outdoors, thereby lessening the need for complicated studio arrangements); digitalized video effects units (computer devices for creating exotic video images quickly by breaking apart the normal flat television picture and

rearranging the dots); three-dimensional computer animation machines; electronic art stations; computerized film processing laboratories; and wireless microphones. Taken together, these technologies radically shorten not only the time it takes to produce an ad initially but also the time required to change course in the midst of an advertising campaign. And once the production is complete, new video distribution technologies, such as satellite uplinks and cable, come into play, further abbreviating the lag time for getting the ad on the tube.

In regard to the new media, the second major development during the 1988 election was the breakthrough made by cable and satellite television services. Consider the following:

• In the 1984 presidential election, political advertising on cable was too small to register. In 1988, the Bush campaign spent about 5 percent of its national television advertising budget on cable. The Dukakis camp followed with about 3 percent of its budget devoted to cable.

• Cable was also a pivotal player in many state and local elections in 1988. One among many examples comes from California, where a single cable advertising company reports placing nearly $400,000 worth of ads regarding various initiatives on the California ballot.

• One cable ad in particular became a news item on its own. In September, an independent political action committee aired exclusively on cable an ad featuring a police mug shot of Willie Horton—the Massachusetts prisoner whose criminal rampage following his failure to return to prison from a weekend furlough was the subject of the Bush campaign's own ads on broadcast television. The Bush campaign carefully avoided advertising that Horton was a black man but the independent ad broke this taboo. The media consultant who placed the ad has described how he carefully selected the cable networks on which the ad ran, targeting women and southern audiences in particular as groups likely to be responsive to the Horton ad.

• 1988 was a year for candidate-controlled satellite feeds. When George Bush officially announced his run for the presidency, he used a private satellite service to beam the announcement to local television stations around the country. In the primaries, Dukakis purchased satellite time to transmit a program on elderly affairs to a onetime network of midwestern cable stations. During the gen-

eral election, both Bush and Dukakis frequently made themselves available for live interviews on local newscasts via satellite.

These examples of new media campaigning during the 1988 election demonstrate that, while broadcast television and newspapers still dwarf all media rivals when it comes to politics, change is coming. The dazzling array of new communications technologies that is the subject of this book—satellites, cable, videocassette recorders, computers—is off the showroom shelves and out on the campaign trail. The ability of a small independent political action committee to cause a stir in the campaign with a single cable ad campaign shows that candidates of the future will ignore the new media arsenal only at their peril.

All this gives a new twist to the old McCluhan saying that "the medium is the message." By now we have come to understand that television coverage has changed the art of successful campaigning, placing emphasis on good visuals, sound bites short enough to make the nightly network news, and stump speeches laden with news-grabbing attack lines. The question for us today is whether the computer, the satellite, and the other new media studied in this book carry with them their own new political message.

While this sudden flurry in the use of new communication technologies in campaigns has yet to be matched in other areas of politics, the impact of the new media has been felt widely, and further transformations are likely to alter, for good or ill, the way we conduct politics generally. Virtually every institution of American government has exploited recent advances in communication to some extent. Organized interest groups have pioneered the use of the new technologies to mobilize their supporters. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have adjusted to the presence of cable television cameras. And much of the daily work of government would be impossible in the absence of computers or satellite telecommunications.

In contrast, the political impact of the new media on the ordinary citizen is still sketchy and limited. At the receiving end many citizens are the targets of direct mail campaigns. But a more active use of the new media by grassroots organizers still lies in the future. In theory, the new media promise the rebirth of participatory democracy, through the ability of citizens to attend electronic town meetings, to speak as well as be spoken to through

television, and to use computers to gain access to remote data. In practice, nonprofit, civic uses of computer and video power are dwarfed by the commercial market in electronic information services, videoconferencing, and the like. This gap between civic and commercial access to the new media, between candidate use and citizen use, is a vexing problem for democracy in the new electronic age.

This book falls into three major parts. In chapters 1 and 2, we introduce both the democratic theory and the new technologies that will occupy us throughout the work. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, we study the implications of the new media for three major political domains: elections, governance, and citizen participation. In chapters 6 and 7, we turn to issues of law and regulatory policy, in a comparative as well as an American perspective. A concluding chapter 8 builds on these three parts of the book to discuss the value choices that lie ahead.

The title of this book makes sudden neighbors of technology and democracy. In actual political practice, of course, coexistence between the new media and democratic ideals is hard to achieve. High-tech enthusiasts complain that old-style democracy makes a fetish of slowness and turns its back on ways to accelerate communication between citizens and government. On the democratic side, many a Jeremiah has responded by railing at the worship of speed and the invasion of privacy that comes from "updating" democracy. On both sides, these lamentations have much to teach us—about uncritical allegiance to the political status quo, on the one hand, or to the so-called communications "revolution," on the other.

Ultimately, modern telecommunications is neither democracy's devil nor its messiah. The electronic breakthroughs studied in this book *can* be a boon to democracy, if they are devoted to public purposes as well as to private enterprise. As suggested by the title of this book, democratic uses of the new media depend on developing and regulating technology as a *common* wealth of the citizenry. But these technical advances can also hinder democracy, if they are used to magnify the problems of equality and access, of amplified leaders and voiceless audiences, that have plagued mass media politics. Of course, it is far easier to invoke the term "commonwealth" metaphorically than to give democratic substance to the word. Much of this book will be devoted to

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delivering that substance but a prefatory remark may be helpful here.

The idea of a common wealth or a common good has figured prominently in the history of democratic thought. We can hardly describe, much less justify, democratic politics except by reference to the common good and to the participation of the people in shaping the political life they seek to share.

The classical notion of a common good, however, does not jibe entirely with modern individualism. Freedom of choice—the right of individuals to follow their own conscience and choose their own values—has become central to our understanding of liberty. In a pluralistic society such as ours, there is no orthodox or shared standard of what is morally valuable. Instead, we cherish the very act of having to choose values for ourselves. The task of a free government, in this view, is to preserve freedom of choice and of conscience intact.

But this task can be accomplished only by separating politics from morality—by treating every person's value choices as worthy of equal political respect. In short, democratic politics must be neutral on the question of values, no longer seeking to define a public or common good for citizens but leaving the matter to be resolved by the individual conscience.

In the United States, the protection of individual liberty against state-imposed orthodoxies has attained heroic, even epic proportions. Whether the subject is birth control, religion, or speech, the ideal of freedom of choice and of conscience remains the sovereign ideal. This is the distinctive American contribution to the meaning of liberty, and it is a contribution whose importance cannot be overstated.

Still, there are limits to a politics of individualism and free choice. In extreme form, such a politics isolates people and undermines the neighborhoods and communities, the group associations and allegiances that give content and stability to individual choices. In extreme form, such a politics also deprives citizens of a shared identity and diminishes the reach of the common good.

The challenge for democratic thought in the United States is to retrieve the politics of the common good in a way that will honor the lessons we have learned about individual liberty and social diversity. In this task, the image of a commonwealth can be our guide. Citizens of a commonwealth are divided in their aims

and aspirations in life; they share no single conception of the good life and conform to no one sovereign moral or religious authority. Nonetheless, they understand themselves to be united into a community with a distinctive political culture and tradition. They accept that their individual ways of life are bound up with the survival and perfection of that political culture, and they treat each other as equal participants in governing the community that is their common wealth. So understood, the commonwealth ideal guards against three dangers that concern us in this book: (1) the corruption of the politics of the common good into a politics of mass conformity; (2) the corruption of the politics of pluralism and diversity into a politics of faction and balkanization; and (3) the corruption of a politics of individualism into a politics of isolation.

The choices we make about the electronic media will greatly influence our success or failure in avoiding these dangers. Used wisely, mass communications is a powerful antidote to the democratic ills of group faction and personal isolation. Across obstacles of time and distance, the mass media make it possible to expand participation in the debates and deliberations, the meetings and assemblies that are the hallmark of democratic politics. Used unwisely, the mass media are themselves the disease. They turn active citizens into passive spectators, lulled by bland and homogeneous messages. They eliminate collective deliberation in favor of soliciting immediate responses from isolated individuals. And they ignore the rich diversity of group life in favor of appeals to an undifferentiated mass audience. Clearly, the new media present us with important choices. Our purpose in writing this book is to bring a concern for democratic values to bear on these choices, which even now are being made in Congress, in administrative agencies, and in corporate offices across the country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our children were always on our mind and under our feet while writing this book. This is as it should be, when writing a book about the future. After all, it is their generation that will decide how to use the emerging wonders of communication. And it is they who will enrich or impoverish democracy. Their tender years have served to remind us how difficult it is to predict the future. But the trust they have in us as fathers makes it our responsibility to participate as best we can in securing the future of democracy.

Our wives had to contend with the usual havoc that accompanies the writing of a book. They had to do this, moreover, while pursuing their own distinguished and demanding careers. The result was often turmoil but it was turmoil from which we all extracted an important lesson: No amount of new technology can substitute for democracy at home—or elsewhere.

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