“When I scored that final goal,” Paul Henderson is reported to have said the day after putting the finishing touch on the Soviets in the ’72 Summit Series, “I finally realized what democracy is all about.” We should all be so lucky. Anyone who has ever slid a puck across the line into the net knows the euphoria it can bring. And anyone who has risked a thought in the midst of such euphoria knows how easily the rush can be mistaken for insight. Alas, Henderson—perhaps mercifully—failed to elaborate.

Happily, discussions about new media (and what, by the way, does “new” mean anymore?) and democracy have advanced to the point where euphoric pronouncement can no longer successfully masquerade as insight. With a few exceptions, this volume reflects this advance. In fact, even the exceptions are instructive: set against the generally sober, thoughtful, and critical pieces that make up the bulk of the book, the exhortative, declarative, and populist offerings of Ira Magaziner (a 1998 speech when he was Clinton’s senior advisor of the development of strategy for the Internet) and David Winston (former aide to Newt Gingrich) serve nicely to illustrate just how intellectually weak the currency of Internet demagoguery has become. Sadly, the intellectual weakness of this discourse is probably in inverse proportion to its ideological appeal in the corridors of power.

Among the stronger contributions here are several from the stalwarts of critical scholarship on the relationship of media technology to democratic citizenship in America. A chapter by Benjamin Barber rehearses several of the themes for which he is well known in relation to new media, including the corrosive effects of speed, fragmentation, privatization, and image-culture—all seemingly accelerated by the Internet—on the possibility of deliberative or “strong” democracy. Michael Schudson’s provocative chapter sets out four historical conceptions of citizenship in America and problematizes the contemporary tendency to equate “good citizenship” with being “well informed.” For Schudson, this “Progressivist fallacy” truncates our critical and practical approach to new technologies. As he puts it: “[T]o imagine that the potential of the computer age for democracy lies in the accessibility of information to individual citizens and voters who will be moved by the millions to petition and to vote more wisely than ever before is to imagine what will not be—and it is to exercise a very narrow democratic imagination in the first place” (p. 57). Though far from an uncritical utopian, Phil Agre nevertheless finds democratic possibility in digital technology’s interruption of established, undemocratic configurations of the state and civil society, and reason for optimism in the sense that “the Internet fertilizes the soil of democratic culture” (p. 65). And while he observes that, when it comes to the relationship between government and the Internet, “virtually none of democracy’s basic attributes are present” (p. 72), Doug Schuler goes on to detail some of the highly promising forms of non-governmental political activism that have been catalyzed and supported by this medium.

The book’s section on “Global Developments” is thin and lacking in coherence or direction, though it does contain what is certainly the volume’s most moving chapter: Ashley Dawson’s reflection on the agonizing attempt to use broadcasting as a means of crafting a public sphere adequate to the historical and political complexities of post-apartheid South Africa. This piece of writing was enough to restore my faith in both television and cultural studies. The section on news and information in the digital age is more extensive but similarly spotty. Two stand-outs, however, are John Hartley’s quasi-Innisian essay on the “frequencies of public writing” and David Scholle’s subtly political exegesis of the multiple and contextual meanings of information, and its relationship to space and time. Both are theoretically interesting and provide much-needed critical, conceptual distance from what often appears as too immediate to think clearly about.
Critics who look for what is missing rather than what is present will find much to quarrel with here. Despite a statement of comparative intentions in the book’s foreword, the volume is overwhelmingly U.S.-centric in its concerns and assumptions, a problem not relieved by token chapters on South African TV (no matter how excellent it is) and the Internet in Cuba. The digital divide, in either its domestic or global manifestations, is treated only obliquely. Political economy and policy studies are generally under-represented, and, most conspicuously, there is no concentrated effort to engage critically with questions of gender in relation to the politics of new media. Still, there is a great deal that is worthwhile here. Perhaps these omissions are best read as evidence that, unlike the Internet and democracy, no book can ever be all things to everyone.

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