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## Book review

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

*Information Politics on the Web*, by Richard Rogers, is both an “expose of the politics of information devices” and a call for new practices of source inclusion and information adjudication that will help increase the inclusivity, fairness and scope of representation in electronically mediated politics. Rogers argues that a combination of exclusivity and closed logics in key information portals, such as Google, privilege entrenched political actors and official sources, reinforcing traditional hierarchies at the expense of alternative accounts of political reality. For example, a search for “terrorism” in Google yields “the White House, the CIA, the FBI, the Heritage Foundation, a smattering of strategic studies groups at Universities, CNN, and Al Jazeera” within the top twenty listings. These results provide an indication that the Web is becoming increasingly dominated by what Manuel Castells refers to as “informational politics,” where governments and political parties act not through traditional government–citizen exchanges but through mediated forums such as newspapers, broadcasting media and the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Although cyberspace may be seen as opening opportunities for political representation, this outcome is by no means guaranteed.

To counter these anti-democratic trends, Rogers introduces instruments designed specifically to flatten the hierarchies of political voice and move the processes of information adjudication back into the public sphere—from the back-end politics of paid search engine placement, for example, to the front end politics of transparent (but not necessarily inclusive) information tools.

By creating instruments that can illuminate the Web’s “embedded information” (that information generated online and not simply repurposed from offline sources) and the “adjudicative cultural processes” that drive its evolution, Rogers hopes to open a new space for informational politics, a space where formally disenfranchised actors may have a voice “side by side” with more mainstream political actors. The book will likely be of interest to a wide range of readers: social scientists looking for new approaches to Internet research, activists frustrated with the obstacles of traditional information politics, politicians and policy makers interested in the democratic potential of new media, and even artists striving to provide new windows into the dynamics of reality construction in new electronic social spaces.

Rogers details four instruments in the book: the lay decision support system, the Web issue index, the issue barometer and the election issue tracker. Each tool will likely appeal to different sectors of the reading audience.

The “lay decision support system” playfully and artistically exposes the collision of official and unofficial accounts of Viagra as they appear in Web space. This “viagra tool” leverages the relative flatness of the open Web to highlight the many (occasionally illicit) uses of this Pfizer drug that one is unlikely to see in a promotional brochure or even the evening news. Rogers argues that the emergence of Viagra culture is more effectively mirrored by, and thus observable in, the information dynamic of Web media. While the

<sup>1</sup> The Power of Identity, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. II. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell (1997) (second edition, 2004).

overall point that the Web harbors important points of view and clusters of information we are unlikely to encounter through official channels or corporate media is clearly established, the instrument itself offers few insights into new instrument design for researchers.<sup>2</sup>

The “issue index” and its extension in the “election issue tracker” are likely to be of interest to the politician, activist, and researcher alike as they provide new measures of issue prominence within the space of civil society organizations and a way of mapping the flows of attention to political issues between political organizations, the press and NGOs.

Of particular interest to communication scholars and social scientists is the issue barometer, a confluence of major innovations turning formerly opaque data embedded in the Web to transparent indicators of key players in political issue networks and their interrelations, as well as the “heat,” “intensity” and “territorialization” of the issues they debate, that is sure to stimulate even the most jaded of researchers. The heat or temperature of a debate is inferred from the relative number of times content has been refreshed on Web pages within the network. Intensity is determined via the number of actors in the network who, on the basis of textual analysis, take a position on the issue. Finally, the territorialization of the debate is determined by the relative number of countries represented in the actor domains that comprise the issue network. While there are certainly methodological issues related to each of the component measures of the barometer, the barometer concept itself represents one of the first serious attempts to establish a dynamic measure of political issue debates on the Web. As such, the tool is an excellent start.

While the book provides a wealth of insight into the development of instruments for researching the sociology of the Web, I found Rogers’ decision to include four tools instead of focusing on one or two a bit frustrating. The most methodologically rigorous and potentially useful of these tools, the *Issue Crawler* software, which maps issue networks for the Web barometer, is given short shrift. This network mapping software, which Rogers has generously made available to the global research community, has helped to drive an increase in interest in the sociological study of the Web graph. A full chapter at least covering methodological and validity issues would have added to the value of the instrument and this book. Further, though the book deals with the political implications of different structures of classification, it ignores some of the more controversial and interesting issues surrounding information ontology. Rogers points out how Web-based information instruments might serve to enhance the public sphere by “flattening the hierarchies of credibility,” but ignores the growing debate over emerging open and inclusive, organic ontologies employed by popular social bookmarking tools, a movement increasingly referred to as “folksonomy.” To be fair, *Information Politics on the Web* is a 2004 edition and social categorization only a recent Web phenomenon.

The above criticisms aside, this book is highly recommended for anyone struggling with the challenges of researching patterns of social interaction and expression on the Internet. Rogers’ attempts to develop new instruments of measurement should be of immediate benefit to political activists and strategists of all types. For more mainstream academic researchers, however, most of these tools are too early stage to satisfy reliability and validity requirements met by more established methods such as traditional ethnography, survey research and content analysis. Nevertheless, the tools embody an innovative analytical approach with tremendous promise that interested researchers will be able to carry forward in the years to come. For this reason, I find *Information Politics on the Web* an invaluable resource.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the tool’s domain name, [viagratoool.org](http://viagratoool.org), as of Spring and Summer 2005, appears to be out of service.