<u>Mediacracy Revisited: A Pessimistic Assessment of the Roles of American Political Parties in the Internet Age</u>
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Introduction: This paper––its title in homage to Kevin Phillips (1975)–– examines how political parties in the USA have responded to new styles of political organization and electoral campaigning that the Internet and related Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have fostered. The first section reviews the critical roles that political parties are supposed to play in realizing democracy in contemporary mass societies, and the challenges they face in fulfilling those roles. The second section examines how the Democratic and Republican party organizations and their public officeholders have used ICTs to carry out tasks that fulfill these roles, including candidate recruitment, campaign management, and development of coherent choices regarding candidates, programs and policies before, during and between elections. The final section assesses the implications of these findings for democratic theory and practice in the USA and other self-proclaimed democratic nations.

Political Parties and Mass Democracy: One of the shibboleths of political science is that viable political parties are a key component of any successful contemporary democracy. American political scientists whose professional work centers on elections, public opinion, mass media and political behavior generally view political parties more favorably than does the public in general. They also have developed theories that free and fair electoral contests between candidates endorsed by at least two competing party organizations are necessary conditions for the USA—or any mass polity—to credibly proclaim itself a democratic nation (Schattschneider, 1942: chapter 1). Most of us are probably familiar with the basic tenets of this argument.

Well functioning political parties are said to perform vital services that actuate democratic processes. Most importantly, they provide the means to aggregate, mobilize and represent the interests of the otherwise unorganized and relatively powerless many against those of the well-organized or otherwise individually powerful few (Burnham, 1969: 20). Since at least the mid-twentieth century, mainstream American political scientists have favored strengthening democratic political parties and making them responsive to and responsible for promoting and protecting the interests of their supporters (Committee on Political Parties, 1950). Most democratic theorists look favorably upon some type of "responsible parties" model of governance. The models call for competing parties to offer voters alternative slates of candidates pledged to work toward passing distinct political programs. Those elected as officeholders should attempt to implement those programs, and their supporters in turn should weigh the officeholders' performance, judge the programs' effectiveness and hold the parties responsible for their successes or failures at the next election. In the parlance of our discipline the formal party organizations provide voters with a means of controlling governance

by linking the party-in-the-electorate with the party-in-government (Hetherington & Larson, 2009: chapters 1-2).

Absent responsible parties, advocates contend that elections can easily become exercises in demagoguery that produce stubborn and egotistic officeholders, who possess neither the skill nor the will to agree upon viable political programs. An executive-centered politics results: a politics dominated largely by presidents, governors, mayors and perhaps a few prominent legislative leaders. Positioned to command media attention, they are buttressed by personal staffs or by public administrators, and usually are allied with well-heeled groups of clientele.

While some scholars have argued that responsible parties models are inappropriate for decentralized American parties to adopt, and some even have questioned the extent to which such models function successfully in parliamentary systems, few have argued that constant unmediated communication between individual voters and state or national political leaders—direct democracy if you will–– is a better way to effect democratic governance. (Kornhauser, 1959; Urbinati, 2006; but see Budge, 1996 for a defense).

Democratic governance is still thought to begin at the local level. Here citizens can organize themselves to press their demands for programs and services and to elect representatives to carry out those demands. Because local governmental institutions are usually smaller and their distance less remote than those of state and national governments, the cost of entering politics is less exorbitant. Potentially, citizens can engage in a rich exchange of ideas about public policy, a process that new communication technologies can greatly enhance. Moreover, the American federal system, in which each state defines its local party structure, normally places local political party organizations in a position to facilitate citizen mobilization.

Potential of course is not the same as reality. The decline of powerful city and county party organizations that began with the Progressive movement at the end of the 19th century proceeded throughout the 20th and accelerated following World War II. Civil service reforms and court decisions reduced party patronage. Structural reforms, such as nonpartisan elections of city and county officials, appointments of professional city managers, and adoption of city charters that diminished the powers of mayors or county executives, served to weaken local parties' influence over governance. Shifts of population and businesses from central cities to suburbs in metropolitan areas undercut the political and economic clout of central cities and sometimes even metro areas' central counties.

New communication technologies shifted aspects of fundraising and electoral campaigning from labor intensive to capital intensive activities. Over the same period social changes led to increased numbers of single parent households as well as increased proportions of two income households among intact families. These

developments reduced the pool from which local parties could draw volunteers. As a result, personal organizations of public officeholders or of affluent candidates have increasingly assumed many of the electoral functions that local parties' volunteers used to perform. Incumbent officials and affluent candidates have less need for party workers to act as intermediaries: they can use modern media to contact voters directly.

Other structural changes in the American economy have contributed to local party organizations' decline. Decreased numbers of mining and manufacturing jobs, increased mobility of capital in the globalized economy, and expansion of the professional and managerial sectors have diminished the ranks and the powers of unionized labor. Years of rising stock market values and perceived prosperity, increasing levels of formal education and declining proportions of European immigrants have encouraged Americans—especially whites––to see themselves as members of the middle class. The homogenization and consolidation of mainstream media among corporate giants have helped to popularize and reinforce the cultural themes of nineteenth century liberal individualism––now called conservatism—and to disparage political organizations associated with policies or programs that distribute benefits to the working and lower classes. Local political parties in particular have little control over these developments. However, even state and national party organizations, which have become more sophisticated and powerful, have done so by embracing middle and upper economic classes more closely and adapting policies to accommodate those who fund their candidates. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that American political parties can be studied more fruitfully as dependent variables, organizations that accommodate to changing circumstances rather than forces that initiate change (Hetherington & Larson, 2009:8 ff.).

While these structural economic changes seem more to the advantage of the Republicans than the Democrats, surveys indicate that voters have no great love for either major party. Over the past 40 years the proportions of Americans who identify as strong Democrats or strong Republicans have diminished, and when offered three choices—Democrat, Republican or Independent––a plurality choose to call themselves Independent. Straight ticket voting has declined, and many voters—sometimes majorities––tell pollsters that people should disregard party affiliation and vote for the best candidate instead.[i]

Nevertheless, party identification remains the strongest single factor that predicts how Americans vote. Except for a short period from 1972 to 1980, the proportion of voters who deny feeling closer to any political party has hovered between six and twelve percent. The great majority of "independents" admit they lean Democratic or Republican, and their voting patterns resemble those of party loyalists. Indeed, the proportions of Independent Democrats and Republicans who vote for their party's presidential and congressional candidates often exceed those of "weak" Democrats or Republicans (ANES cumulative file 1948-2004; Flanigan & Zingale 2009:112-13; Hetherington & Larson, 2009:209).

Regardless of their diminished standing, local Democratic and Republican organizations still offer candidates certain advantages. By law, they are generally required to provide captains or committee members to liaison with voters in every precinct, and in contrast to minor political parties, their imprimaturs, which still resonate with voters, automatically appear on the ballot. The fact remains that major party candidates win nearly every partisan election at all levels of government, and even in formally non-partisan elections, such as those for Mayor and Council in Chicago, Cincinnati and Dallas, the candidates they endorse usually defeat those who run as independents or are endorsed by minor parties. The parties' control over who gets nominated has lessened, but like aging madams of once proud bawdy houses, they are eager to bestow their fading establishments' favors upon anyone willing to pay the price of winning a direct primary or otherwise garnering a nomination.

Compared to old-fashioned patronage driven machines, contemporary local party organizations tend to be peopled by activists drawn from higher occupational strata. They also tend to focus more on fund-raising and other forms of electoral support and services for candidates and public officeholders. Activists' material motives have evolved from securing employment as patronage appointees to securing "honest graft" in the form of preferments as contactors or licensees. Lawyers, insurers and other service or product providers can make useful business contacts at local and state levels, and those ambitious to run for elected office can cultivate potential supporters. Party activity can provide solidary satisfaction through opportunities to work for winning candidates and to socialize with important people. Lastly, it can provide ideological satisfaction for those who want government to adopt particular public policies (Riordan, 1948 Wilson, 1973).

Despite the accelerated social, economic and political change that followed World War II, a remarkable stability remains in the viable party choices available to most American voters. Regional voting patterns and the relative strengths of social and economic groups have changed, but the major socio-economic groups associated with the Democratic and Republican parties have remained largely the same (Hetherington & Larson, 2009: 200). Since the mid 1990s, however, the major parties, their candidates and public officials have increasingly deployed the Internet and related ICTs not only for electoral purposes, but also for day-to-day organizational operations and matters of governance. The next section reviews how the new media have affected these operations.

Political Parties and Democratic Participation in the USA: Nearly everyone who studies mass media in the USA and elsewhere recognizes the Internet's potential to democratize politics. Optimists have predicted that Internet related ICTs will progressively empower diverse political parties, activists and interest groups–– especially those that mainstream media and established political institutions usually minimize, denigrate or ignore––to inject their ideas into the electronic commons. Access to the Internet provides the means for any citizen to communicate with

nearly anyone else who shares that access. People can disseminate their opinions or concerns about civic affairs without having to persuade (or to pay) gatekeepers to allow their ideas to reach widespread audiences. For a modest fee they can acquire a domain name, build a website and publish their ideas online. They can also use the Net's communication capabilities to organize new interest groups or political parties.[ii] Optimists expect that the quality of ordinary citizens' democratic participation will improve as these political uses of the Internet proliferate.[iii]

Critics of this scenario—let us call them "realists" rather than "pessimists"–– counsel caution. Realists don't deny that democratic governance requires that public officials take account of people's preferences, but they remind us that despite the new ICTs' accessibility, most people still have neither the interest nor the knowledge to make sound prospective judgments about complex questions facing contemporary governments. And why should they? Before they can take the time to follow public affairs, let alone communicate their opinions, questions or recommendations to elected representatives or other political decision-makers, most people must deal with immediate concerns about family, friends, workplace and the like. Citizens are likely to increase the time and energy they put into political participation only when they perceive that government is the likely cause or the possible solution to problems that affect these immediate concerns. Realists, therefore, recommend leaving policy development and implementation mostly to elected (or appointed) public officials, and they prefer treating election outcomes as retrospective referenda on whether or not to retain incumbent officials (or parties) and their policies. Realists see this as a practical democratic model, provided that citizens who actually follow public affairs can access ICTs in order to express their views and preferences to the general public as well as to policymakers between elections.

Even though the surge of enlightened citizen participation that optimists predicted has not (as yet) appeared in the USA, the Internet has produced significant changes in the ways citizens inform themselves about political and civic affairs and in the strategies and tactics candidates and parties use in election campaigns. Most obviously, increasing proportions of Americans are using the Internet as their primary source for news. The Pew Research Center's annual report on *The State of the Media* indicates that as of January 2011 Americans report they use the Internet more than newspapers as their principal source for news. Only television exceeds the Internet as a news source, and the gap between them is closing. Moreover, the median audience of every other news medium, including cable news has declined, or at best, stagnated over past five years. Paradoxically, however, citizens seeking news online generally visit online versions of familiar news sources like the *New York Times* or CNN. Of the 25 most popular news Web sites in the United States, for instance, Pew found that all but two were previously established news media or else sources like Yahoo or Google News that aggregated information from these same media (Pew 2011).[iv] Several studies show similar concentrations of traffic going to relatively few political bloggers as well as propensities for online news consumers

to seek out sources that seem likely to share their viewpoints, interpretations or opinions on political issues (Davis, 2009; Hindman, 2009).

The difficulties that established media face stem more directly from declining revenue than from declining audiences. The total audiences--online combined with the print, broadcast, or cable--of many traditional news media have grown, but their advertising revenues have not. In 2010, Web advertising surpassed print advertising in the USA for the first time, reaching $26 billion. Unfortunately, only a small fraction––Pew estimates less than a fifth––went to news organizations. The largest share, roughly half, went to search engines that help to drive visitors to the websites, and increasingly use their own databases to choose which ads are most relevant to display to particular visitors. Although advertising losses have affected all the established news media, they have hit newspapers the hardest: a 48 percent decline in advertising dollars since 2006.[v] Even though nearly half their readers now access their newspapers online, the industry grossed $22.8 billion in 2010 from print ad revenue but only $3 billion from Web-based advertising.

Besides competitive political parties western models of democracy posit the central importance of a "free press" or "Fourth Estate" for preserving citizens rights and liberties. Even though commercial news media like to cast themselves in this critical role, the overwhelming majority are first and foremost profit-seeking businesses. To produce original news, media enterprises must invest capital. More importantly, to produce original news that fulfills their watchdog role they must also employ labor. The longer the time and the further afield they send reporters to investigate a story, the more costly their labor. As profits dwindle most news media feel pressure to save money by cutting their staff and focusing their original coverage on particular locales or specialized content. They can rely on stringers employed by news services like the Associated Press or Reuters to provide the bulk of their coverage of regional, national and international events. In order to maintain profits (or stem losses) even large operations like cable and network news or major national newspapers and news magazines have reduced in depth coverage of public affairs and have closed foreign news bureaus. They also have acquired or sold out to media competitors or corporate conglomerates, or they have merged or consolidated operations with the same. They have increased featured coverage of sports, weather, crime, shopping, entertainment, business, religion, or whatever else their market research and consumer feedback indicate pleases their audience. These responses to fiscal problems undercut their avowedly noble missions and have potentially deleterious consequences for the viability of contemporary democratic governance (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009: chapter 5).

In order to understand how American political parties have adjusted their strategies and tactics in response to this new media environment, we need to elaborate upon some of the developments mentioned in the previous section on "Political Parties and Mass Democracy." The expansion of the welfare state, the application of civil service rules to state and local government, the loss of talented volunteers as more women entered the workforce, the rise of television and other

new campaign media, and the increased geographic mobility caused by suburbanization, all eroded functions that local party officials performed in exchange for voters' loyalty at the polls. Instead of working through party officials, citizens could contact elected representatives, executives and bureaucrats to find jobs for the unemployed, support for those in need, help for those in trouble with the law, or aid in obtaining services, applying for licenses, bidding for contracts and the like. A new style of expensive electoral campaigning emerged, one that exploited the communication capabilities of television advertising, computerized mailing and telephone lists, and "free" news coverage of election events. This new style further eroded local party organizations' influence over nominations and elections, and encouraged the growth of independent campaign organizations devoted largely to electing individual candidates:

> Party leaders can encourage some candidate decisions and discourage others, but rarely do they possess sufficient formal power to tell candidates when to run, how to run, what to believe, what to say, or (once in office) how to vote….In jurisdictions where American parties have more than ordinary importance, they are essentially facilitators, helping candidates who wear their label to do better what they would do in any case….The center of most major political campaigns lies primarily in the decisions and activities of individual candidates and in their use of consultants, campaign management firms and the mass media….Fewer and fewer matters are left to chance or to the vicissitudes of party administration (Hetherington & Larson, 2009: 252-53).

Nevertheless, the fears of the demise of party organizations' electoral influence underestimated their resilience. By the late 1970s the national Republican and Democratic party organizations had learned to use the FECA rules to raise money for centralized campaign operations that took advantage of new technologies. While the Republican Party generally led in adopting the new technologies, by the mid-1980s both national organizations were strengthening state party organizations by supplying funds, training, and software that could be deployed for election campaigns as well as for interim activities, such as candidate recruitment, voter registration or petition drives.

When the World Wide Web came to prominence in the 1990s, the major parties' national and state organizations had the technological capacity to use it, but most state organizations' usage lagged behind minor parties' until 1996. As late as 1998 state organizations' webmasters cited communication with party officials and known party supporters as their most useful online campaign activities. Most did not find the Net particularly useful for recruiting new supporters, and it took Bill Bradley's successful fund-raising efforts during the early presidential primaries of 2000 for them to realize that it was economically feasible to solicit and accrue small donations from people who visited their parties' or their candidates' websites (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009: 138).

By 2002 campaign webmasters ranked fund-raising among their top three goals, and by fall of 2004 Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's erstwhile campaign manager pronounced the Internet revolution complete. Virtually every major party candidate for state or national office had an interactive website, as did most of the major parties' official committees all the way down to counties and cities in metropolitan areas. Webmasters had become strategic members of candidates' and parties' campaign organizations, fund-raising online had become commonplace, and audio and video clips were not unusual. By 2008 these clips––often independently produced––had proliferated among candidates' "friends" (and enemies) on social networks. Meanwhile, parties and candidates in western European and other technologically advanced democratic nations were adapting American online campaign techniques to suit their own institutional circumstances (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño 2009: chapter 7; Trippi, J. 2004).

How then can we explain the remarkable stability in the viable choices available to American voters despite the revolutionary changes that give unprecedented communication capabilities to nearly everyone from established elites to lowly peons? The rosiest explanations suggest that as the Democratic and Republican parties' principal goal is to win elections, they must attract support from diverse groups of voters that have different policy priorities. Strategically, this encourages parties to adopt moderate stances and to show willingness to compromise in order to build majorities that will support significant portions of their policy agendas. Darker explanations suggest that political parties and their principal funders ally with commercial news media to restrict public policy choices to a limited set of outcomes acceptable to privileged elites. The final section of this paper considers the plausibility of these and other explanations as well as their implications for democratic theory and practice.

Plus ça change? A half dozen years after publication of his now classic *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), Kevin Phillips published a prescient (though less known) book about the likely effects that new communication technologies would have on American politics. *Mediacracy: American Parties and Politics in the Communications Age* (1975) was not a paean to the USA's growing conservatism. Indeed, Phillips' preface contained a warning: "A lot has been written about the corrupting effect of money on politics, yet the corrupting effect of communications technology may be even worse (p. ix)."

After presenting a summary of the political, social and economic changes leading to post-industrial society's expansion of the service and information sectors and a consequent diminution of traditional manufacturing, Phillips hazarded a prediction, which he subsequently would explore:

> Coming years are likely to see the media increasingly at the center of U.S. political conflict: first, because of their ongoing increment of power; second because of their espousal of adversary-culture views; third, because of the

increasing adulation by young conservatives of anti-media politics; and fourth, because media influence is becoming so determinative of the fate of politicians and political ideas. The media are seen as replacing party organizations and corporations in influence. (p. 30).

Aside from his over-expectation of the media's (presumably independent) influence on American politics "replacing" that of private corporations as well as party organizations, the prediction anticipated developments extraordinarily well.[vi] Phillips further anticipated the growing importance of the service sector's provision of information, the new media's facilitation of candidate centered campaigns, the resurgence of right leaning religious groups seeking to restore order and tradition, and the corresponding decline of liberal Protestant denominations that tolerated new values. He also highlighted two paradoxes 1) the "old liberalism" had emphasized individual accomplishment and equal opportunity while the new favored a command structure that demanded affirmative action and quotas; and 2) The new American conservatism's opposition to government regulation to achieve economic goals contradicted conservative principles that could be traced back to Hamilton's nationalizing state debt and creating the Bank of the United States. Regarding the contemporary issue of unfettered economic expansion, Phillips cautioned: "At the very least, the fuel and commodity problem must be considered an offset to [goals of] post industrial affluence....(p. 76)"

As to the future of American party politics, Phillips foresaw a realignment that placed greater emphasis on ideology and communications technology. The Republican leadership would migrate "from boardrooms of Manhattan and clubrooms of Boston to petroleum clubs of Texas and the defense industry suburbs of California (p.197)." The party would appeal to disgruntled blue-collar workers, urban ethnics in the north, and Wallace supporters in the south. The Democrats would hold on to union supporters, big city machines, and senior southerners, but all of these groups were in decline. They might gain new votes from knowledge workers, and ironically, also from displaced (mostly northeastern) Republican coteries and the socially liberal upper middle class Republicans who supported their leadership. In this polarized politics, conservatism would lose much of its traditional meaning. Indeed, the Ripon Society had already characterized it as "radical" (pp. 197-200).

To my mind an accurate description of party politics in USA today, would have features that bear resemblance to Phillips' predictions. Compared to the mid-1970s the major parties are certainly more ideological, their partisan rhetoric is more polarized, and their elected officials––both national and state––are more adversarial and less prone to compromise on complex controversial issues. Over the same period increased proportions of the American electorate have come to identify themselves as Liberals or Conservatives, and there has been a secular drift toward conservatism. Nevertheless, 50 percent still classify themselves as "middle of the road" or "haven't thought about it" and these remain the modal responses, on a six category scale (Flanigan & Zingale, 2009: 161).

We have already explained why the predicted dependence of major electoral campaigns on ICTs has become the norm, but it is fair to conclude that using these same media has encouraged polarization and exacerbated conflict between the parties? The short answer is "yes."

Even though modern democratic nations hardly resemble "company towns" where public policies served the interests of one powerful group, governments consistently promulgate policies that advantage particular interests. Consider democratic governance in the USA, the capitalistic country that operates (at least for a few more years) the world's largest economy. The economic remedies for the recession-cum-depression of 2008-2010 of the Bush (Republican) and Obama (Democratic) administrations differed in detail, but they shared the common thread that taxpayers had to subsidize the major business and financial firms whose reckless schemes (arguably) had caused the crisis. Why? Because the central functions government had allowed these firms to perform were so critical to the American economy that we could not let them fail!

 Far from being atypical, this example merely illustrates a familiar pattern. Social scientists and investigative journalists have shown that most interest groups represent citizens whose preferences public policies already tend to favor. In capitalistic nations, members of these favored groups generally have more wealth, income and education than the majority of their compatriots. Their leaders and lobbyists not only establish and maintain friendly relations with relevant public officeholders, party officials, and candidates, but they also develop contingency plans with their allies to handle anticipated political problems, events or demands. Interest groups reinforce these relationships by providing policymakers with resources in exchange for policy decisions. Resources may include information, expertise, mobilization of members and allied groups, fundraising, donations and independent expenditures at election times, and present or future employment for friends, relatives or the policymakers themselves (Strolovich 2007).

> By and large, organized group representation in Washington is about maintaining the status quo. Regardless of the political ideology of an interest group…its goals are to maintain established relationships and sustain the existing balance of power in its policy domain. When those conditions are met, the organization may then seek to broaden its scope of influence (Shaiko 2005: 1).

Even though business groups generally favor Republican policies to those of the Democrats, they find it prudent to maintain good relations with public officials of both parties. Other established groups pursue similar strategies. In any jurisdiction with competitive elections, it usually is cheaper and easier to allocate a portion of a group's resources to support an election campaign or to provide services or information to help officials carry out their duties than to oppose them outright. Positive actions are likely to earn the gratitude––or at least gain the ear––

of otherwise unsympathetic political decision-makers. And if well financed groups are really dissatisfied with or desirous of particular policy outcomes, they can deploy new and established ICTs — overtly or covertly––to express opposition or to promote alternatives.

Editors and publishers of any particular news platform have the capacity to choose which public affairs to cover, which to emphasize, and how to frame the coverage. True, the exigencies of the business model pressure them to research and indulge the interests, attitudes and desires of the audiences they wish to attract. As it happens, however, the majority of those who follow public affairs most closely are drawn from the more affluent and educated segments of society, the very people who belong to political interest groups in disproportionately high numbers. It follows that most business groups and others that seek to uphold or strengthen favorable elements of the status quo normally can find allies in the media willing to abet their efforts to oppose, alter or create relevant government policies. The interest groups can underwrite coordinated efforts that include formal advertising, news reports, and commentaries that extend across media platforms. This coordination is facilitated by three factors: 1) the overall commonality established values that most media owners and affluent interest groups share; 2) the growing concentration of ownership of major news media both within and across platforms; 3) the capability of sophisticated ICTs to disseminate the message(s) of the day for appropriate journalists, news anchors, political analysts, talk show hosts, commentators, bloggers and tweeters, robocallers, rssfeeders, friendly government officials or anyone else to repeat.[vii]

If a group fears that the policy changes it desires might become so controversial as to harm future relations with clientele or public officials, it can reduce that risk by underwriting its operations anonymously through Internal Revenue Code 501(c) non-profit corporations that do not have to reveal their donors. The group can choose an existing 501(c), or it can form a new one, give it an attractive name, and formally keep an arm's length from its "independent" operations.

Despite their similar values and the legal advantages they enjoy, established groups often disagree over questions of public policy. When that happens, the news media are apt to play up the controversies in order to attract a greater share of the increasingly fragmented audience. If controversies tend to follow traditional partisan divisions the media will seek out Democratic and Republican leaders or spokespersons and their respective allies across all their platforms. As their business model instructs mass media to cater to their clientele, they know that a majority of their public affairs audience seeks not merely information but also confirmation of their opinions or preconceptions. Moreover, as the traditional public affairs audience ages, their younger replacements tend to prefer fast moving multi-media to stagnant print or tabular presentations, animated debates to dignified discussions, and heated rhetoric to logical explanation. The evidence indicates that

news sources that foment or otherwise emphasize controversy have increased their share of the public affairs audience.[viii]

While citizens can glean new information and interpretations from sources that cater to their ideological or partisan propensities, the long-term effects seem likely to narrow their perspectives. With practice, attentive citizens can develop personal search paradigms that exclude sources that often contain subject matter or interpretations that they find discomforting. *My New York Times, My Wall Street Journal,* My Social Circle, My Favorite News Network or News Aggregator, My Favorite Blogs––using the Internet and related ICTs can mean never having to say, "I'm sorry, but I just encountered a well-reasoned argument that challenges my opinion."

There appear to be some dangers for democracy growing here. First, in contrast to the ideals of deliberative democracy on the electronic commons, studies show that repetition of ideas within largely homogeneous groups tends to reinforce biases and to breed intolerance of opposing viewpoints (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño 2009: 82-87)**.** Second, the widespread acceptance of business models by political parties and news media encourages citizens to act as though they were consumers and to consider public policy outputs as they were though they were commodities. This leads to the denigration of public goods, such as unpolluted rivers, clean air or wetlands, because business models find them difficult to price. Consumers, after all, are largely concerned with outcomes that satisfy their private desires and those of persons or groups they hold dear. They rarely consider whether their private transactions help or hinder resolving broader problems that affect the quality of life––perhaps even the survival––of the society as a whole. Third, business models incentivize the manufacture of artificial wants and needs, much as commercials for candy and sweetened cereal stimulate our childish appetites. ICTs bombard consumers with messages urging them to indulge. Quick decisions are good. Buy now! Slow is replaced by fast; essays are replaced by e-mails; e-mails are replaced by tweets; complex is replaced by simple.

In place of assessing how policy alternatives might resolve societal problems, commercial news media normally frame their analyses in the context of how various outcomes will affect the next election. Major party leaders and public officials join in the perpetual election game. Both political parties avoid or postpone addressing many important problems because their resolution would require citizen consumers to pay higher taxes. To their discredit, Democratic and Republican political elites, in cahoots with the commercial news media, have conditioned a substantial portion of the American public to respond to proposed solutions in the manner of Frankenstein's monster: "Taxes bad!" Among other things this reluctance to take up difficult social and economic issues has led to redistributions of wealth and income toward the upper classes to such an extent that the current patterns resemble those of the latter decades of the 19th century.

Toward the end of *Mediacracy* Kevin Phillips anticipated this trend. He wrote of "openings for corporations, not unlike the late 19th century laissez-faire period" except that corporations would focus more on career politicians than on party organizations. He quoted Moisei Ostrogorski's pioneering study, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (1910) describing how the corporations effectively had bought the support of the then-dominant Republican Party Organization:

> [W]ith an unquenchable thirst for gain, they needed…the compliance of Congress and of the State Legislatures. But to buy their members singly… was not an easy matter…. The party Organizations very often provided a way of getting around them more cheaply and more effectively: the representative elected with the all-power aid of the Organizations…had contracted obligations towards them which had no need to be expressly stated; they flowed from the nature of human relations. Entering into an alliance with the Organizations, by means of heavy contributions to their funds, or even by paying them the whole bill of the election campaign, the corporations obtained a hold over the representatives (Phillips pp. 171-72).

Plus ça change? Add some remarks about using new ICTs. Substitute "leadership PACs" or "independent expenditures" for "party Organizations;" give some of that money to the Democrats. In my judgment, you'll be pretty much up to date.

Endnotes

[i] Tea Party spokespersons and bloggers are especially adamant about their non-partisanship. Google: Tea Party Vote Best Candidate Non-partisan

[ii] Those who lack the wherewithal to purchase a domain name, can acquire similar privileges "for free" as long as they're willing to contribute personal information to the databases of networks like Facebook or Blogger.com.

[iii] See Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009: chapter 2 for citations.

[iv] The same types of established media and their aggregators comprised 162 of the 200 most trafficked online news websites.

[v] Newspaper advertising shrank by 6.4 percent in 2010. As the economy recovered throughout the year, however, advertising revenue for other sectors of news media––local, cable and network TV, audio and magazines––showed some recovery. Local TV revenues grew by 17 percent outstripping even online revenue growth of 14 percent. Other gains ranged from 8.4 percent for cable TV down to 1.4 percent for magazines.

[vi] Phillips recognized expanding "electronic computer sales" as part of the communications industry (Chart 5, p. 27), but he provided no substantial discussion of computer networks.

[vii] Recent court decisions also have made it easy for interest groups, rich individuals, private corporations, labor unions and others (including the poor and homeless) to funnel unlimited amounts of money to Internal Revenue Code 527 political advocacy groups (Campaign Finance Institute (CFI), 2009).

[viii] Fox News Channel and MSNBC have pursued this new paradigm while CNN has focused more on the old. FNC's prime time audience has exceeded the combined audiences of both its rivals since 2003, and in 2010 MSNBC's prime time audience exceeded that of CNN for the first time (Pew, 2011).

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