

Wayne Rash, Jr. *Politics on the Nets: Wiring the Political Process*. N.Y.: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1997. xiii + 206 pp. \$22.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7167-8324-4.



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In the particularly drab and event-less presidential campaign of 1996, perhaps the only clear victor was the Internet. After all, 1996 was the year Bob Dole announced his Web site's URL at the conclusion of the first presidential debate. It was the year Web surfers could visit the homepage for the White House and download digitized "meows" from the First Cat, Socks. It was the year front-runners, independents, and unfathomable long-shots got online to recruit, organize, and publicize.

Thus, it is with a certain sense of inevitability that Wayne Rash's book *Politics on the Nets: Wiring the Political Process*, appears. Rash, a Washington-based journalist and Senior Technology Editor and columnist for *Communications Week*, uses the 1996 campaign as a starting point to examine the multiplying intersections between Internet technologies and American politics. Despite some shortcomings, the book succeeds in introducing and exploring a burgeoning topic.

The book is divided into ten chapters, each exploring a slightly different angle. The first two serve to contextualize the topic and to introduce

the fundamentals and characteristics of the Net. The next three analyze the ways in which traditional, non-traditional, and radical/fringe political organizations use the Internet. Chapters Six through Nine examine the effects and repercussions of the net upon political and media spheres. The book concludes with a chapter that speculates about the future of politics on the Net and three useful appendices.

In each chapter, Rash explores the ways in which politics, politicians, and political activism are translated on the Net. At the same time, he examines the manner in which the Internet alters and, at times, transforms traditional politics. As the author notes, the Net's capacity for interactivity, dynamic updating, and distributive communications makes it an appealing option for both politicians and political activists. Conversely, its limited bandwidth, still-not-mainstream acceptance, and tendency to proliferate unverifiable rumors contribute to politicians and political organizations' reluctance to take their campaign "to the wires."

Although it may be a bit early to gauge the results of politicians, political organizations, and political activists going online, Rash does an admirable job in analyzing the decisions behind entering and the early postings of running the "race for cyberspace." This analysis is most effective when applied to perhaps the most traditional of traditional American politics—the presidential campaign. Drawing heavily upon the observations and recollections of Jock Gill, a former member of the White House Office of Media Affairs, and Lisa McCormack, director of publications and online communication for the Republican National Committee, Rash concludes that Democratic and Republican online efforts did not transform but rather improved traditional means of communication. The results were many, including: <blockquote>

- * unfiltered access to the voters
- * fast and inexpensive access to workers
- * effective access to the media
- * control over perceptions
- * feedback from voters (pp. 68-69) </blockquote>

Complementing Rash's perceptive observations is the way in which he presents them. Unlike the set-in-stone prophecy of Bill Gates, Nicholas Negroponte, and AT&T's "You Will" commercials, Rash approaches the current and future state of politics on the Net with questions and predictions, not answers and proclamations. In a field that is becoming increasingly saturated with Wired-like cyber-speculation, this approach is quite welcome.

The book, however, is not without its faults. The most problematic aspect appears during the author's discussion of access. Midway through the book, Rash notes that: <blockquote> a number of observers have suggested that the nets are playing a key role in opening democracy up to a much wider range of people. It would also seem that the nets are playing an equally important role in bringing groups that once were beyond the edge

of democracy into the larger community (p. 99). </blockquote>

Although Rash is correct to suggest that the Net provides *technical* access to politics and the political process, he fails to consider crucial questions of *economic* access. Thus, while Rash includes a few scattered sentences about "e-mail for everyone," he ignores many significant considerations regarding public access, the cost of computer hardware, and the rising price of Internet provider services.

Another problem with the book is its sources. Although the observations made by Jock Gill and Lisa McCormack are perceptive, they are also by definition biased. Further, while Rash does include a few citations for newspaper articles, a bibliography would certainly benefit those interested in pursuing the topic in greater depth. To be fair, *Politics on the Nets* is not intended to be solely (if at all) an academic book, thereby partially excusing it from footnotes and a bibliography. That said, however, the book's contentions would have been strengthened by a brief review of existing literature, from the cyber-critical works found in the James Brook and Iain A. Boal-edited collection, *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information* (City Lights, 1995), to the more popular works of Howard Rheingold and Douglas Rushkoff.

Perhaps as an indirect result, the book suffers at times from a lack of depth and substitutes convenient anecdotes for critical analysis. For example, Rash notes that "one contributing factor to the success of the dissidents during the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising in China was access to outside communications" (p. 162). Why is it that so many writers, journalists, and scholars mention the Net's crucial role in the Tiananmen Square uprising (one of many over-used net legends, or what the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Mike Godwin calls "cyburban myths"), yet seldom take the time to document it?

Perhaps as a subtle compensation for the last two shortcomings, Rash concludes the book with three excellent appendices. Organized under separate headings--"On-Line Services Where You Can Discuss Politics," "Political Groups on the Internet," and "News Media on the Internet"-- the collection of Web sites will prove useful to both new users and veteran "Webheads."

In *Politics on the Nets*, Wayne Rash, Jr. has taken the first plunge into what has--and will continue to become--a critical site for politics, political organizing, and political activism. With his careful analysis of the 1996 presidential "race for cyberspace," Rash takes the first stab at chronicling what will inevitably be called the trial run for mass scale politics on the Net. It will be the task of future writers to observe not only the democratic potential of the emerging synergy, but also its alienating pitfalls.

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