

Ralph Schroeder

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In “Social Theory after the Internet,” Ralph Schroeder provides a theory of social change driven by digital media extending across politics, culture, and the economy. He

illustrates the power of this theory by presenting cases from four countries—China, India, Sweden, and the United States. Schroeder is careful in emphasizing the boundedness of the impact of digital media depending on the contexts of different social systems and countries. The book is a highly ambitious contribution that allows us to take a step back and to systematically think of digital media's contribution to social change in different social systems and its boundedness on country-specific contexts.

At the center of Schroeder's theory is the observation that digital media led to an increase in available information, sources, and to a stronger presence of media in everyday life. Yet, in each of the systems he discusses, this increase in mediatization translates into different types of change. The strongest change, he finds in politics where there is a zero-sum competition for attention among sources and topics in order dominated the political information space. In culture and markets, change is more limited. Here, digital media introduce a heightened degree of interconnection between information producers and consumers or market participants. For all his cases, Schroeder conceptualizes digital media as a subsystem whose impact differs given the characteristics of the respective social system it is integrated in. Digital media, thus, have the potential to change social systems, but the degree of change is neither deterministic nor universal.

Let us focus on one of the social systems Schroeder discusses: politics. Here, the impact of digital media depends on the degree of plurality in which the existing media system is reflecting viewpoints in society. In media systems of little state control with high influence of journalistic norms for balance and fairness—like Sweden or the United States—Schroeder expects limited change with regard to the diversity of viewpoints represented but an increase in competition between traditional and digital media with regard to the limited overall attention toward politics. In media systems of high state control and with limited reflection of the diversity of viewpoints in society, he expects a higher potential for change. Digital media, in principle, would allow under-represented viewpoints to make their way to an audience and to elites irrespective of their recognition by traditional media. He sees this as a reason for the high attention states like China invest in managing not only traditional media but also digital media.

As a corollary, he describes how in systems in which traditional media reflect the breadth and diversity of public opinion within the existing norms of political discourse, outside voices can use digital media to get recognition. He shows this by discussing the use of digital media by right-wing populists. This illustrates, nicely, how the tendency of digital media to allow people a voice who are outside existing norms in political systems can for Western eyes be seen normatively as desirable, as in the case of autocratic or totalitarian systems, or detrimental, as in the case of right-wing populists challenging democratic norms of Western societies.

This book is a very valuable addition to the state of the field. Too often, the social impact of digital media is only discussed within specific social systems, such as politics, culture, or economics. While there have been valuable contributions made on the impact of digital media in each, Schroeder shows that there is much to be gained by taking a perspective that tries to compare the impact of digital media across systems. Importantly, such a comparison allows to identify the boundedness of the impact of

digital media on system-specific contexts. This avoids overly ambitious claims with regard to the expected transformative power of digital media.

Also, the emphasis on comparing the influence of digital media across countries is a very welcome and important contribution. While the value of international comparison has long been known in communication and media research, with regard to the study of digital media, this perspective is still underdeveloped. By comparing countries with very different media and political systems, Schroeder is able to show which influence digital media develops independent of country-specific contexts and which effects depend on country-specific constellations. In a research field that is still heavily dominated by case studies based on the United States, a country that is unique in many relevant regards, this provides a very valuable framework pointing beyond U.S.-centric myopia.

Overall, Schroeder's theory is very insightful on the aspects of social change introduced by digital media based on their increase in available information, be it for producers of information, consumers, or analysts basing decisions on available information. This is a very important element of the impact of digital media on societies. Yet I would venture, this is only one of many. One aspect that might have provided a striking addition concerns organizational and institutional changes driven by digital media. For example, how does the emergence of companies like Amazon, Facebook, or Google as gatekeepers of political information, gateways to audiences and voters, and providers of campaigning infrastructure change organizational practices or the political balance of power?

In combination, Schroeder's book is a highly valuable addition to the literature. His theory focusing on the role of digital media in the competition for limited attention in different social systems provides a promising framework for future comparative studies. Going beyond this, by guiding us to consider the impact of digital media across social systems and countries, Schroeder also nicely illustrates the potential for social science research in raising our ambition to look for context-aware and mechanism-driven general theories. This approach compares very favorably to either overshooting wildly with context-ignorant claims of profound transformations supposedly driven by digital media or lovingly compiled case studies without the ambition to produce generalizable findings.