Preface

Seminal media researchers, such as Max McCombs and Donald Shaw, famously argued that the media seldom have major effects on how we think about particular issues, but do shape what we think about. They have an important ‘agenda-setting’ function. It is in that spirit and expectation that the collection of chapters in this book aims to play a role in shaping the agenda for research on digital politics. Whether you are a new student considering a thesis, a senior researcher considering next steps in your research, or simply an educated person with a serious interest in digital politics, this book is designed to help you think about important issues on the horizon.

This book is one of a series focused on identifying agendas for research in a wide variety of fields. My work on this book and support of the series is based on a conviction that it is critical for researchers to have a more significant role in shaping the future of research. It is not for the lack of an agenda for research, but too often researchers are driven by sources not anchored in academia.

Many sources are outside – albeit closely linked to – academia. They include the news, such as reports on the impact of new digital media, including face recognition, or contemporary issues, including deep fakes. Funding agencies, such as national and regional research councils, are influential in establishing research agendas, as are foundations and other sources of funding for research, including the digital media industries and the big technology firms. Governments and politicians set research agendas when they develop new policy initiatives or commission major policy papers concerning the media, digital technologies or political processes. Most often, these sources may well consult with academics, but are setting the research agenda from the top down.

A more bottom-up agenda develops within academia. Faculty, their departments, and centres, and associated research communities, such as around professional associations, can help academics to formulate their own agendas. And in the digital age, social media and the Internet empower academics to

network with like-minded academics around the world, and to self-publish their thoughts and working papers on blogs, websites and repositories.

Nevertheless, many faculties, particularly those working in what can begin as niche areas, such as digital politics or Internet studies, do not feel that they have adequate networks of support within their own faculty or associations. In the latter half of the 1970s, when I first started to study the politics of computing in organizations and society, I not only had few colleagues working in this area, but I also had many colleagues seeking to dissuade me from pursuing this research, saying that it was 'not political science'. However, I found respected colleagues across multiple disciplines who reinforced my own sense that the political implications of information and communication technologies, such as the Internet, would be profound.

Much later, while directing the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) at the University of Oxford, I was struck by how much many doctoral students and faculty valued the opportunity to spend time at the OII, particularly in order to be among others who shared their interest and expertise in Internet studies. So, I have learned over the course of my career to appreciate the importance of academics following their own star, but also of networking with colleagues who share their interests and research agenda; one evolving from the bottom up rather than the top down.

This was the spirit in which this book was edited and produced. My aim has been to enhance the quality and impact of research on digital politics by stimulating reflection and debate among leading academics about the best topics and approaches for the future of this field. Ideally, it will be a source of support for academics involved in, or considering work on, digital politics as an important line of research.

Central to this objective has been an effort to invite chapters from a diverse range of academics. I began by identifying authors whose work has been influential in digital politics and related fields, such as the Internet and politics, political communication, and communication and technology, and the politics of information technology. While I began with this list, I invited others to balance any conservative bias anchored in past research and to avoid a risk of reinforcing dominant research streams. This process led to the identification of a range of new scholars in this area.

My invitations did not direct any author to focus on a particular area, but asked them to use this opportunity to present their ideas on what research should be undertaken by colleagues in this new field. I was not looking primarily for

new research, or a literature review, but for their personal perspective on the research that should be done, based on whatever inspiration they found in their own work, and their understanding of the history and trajectory of the field. As has been the case for the field, many of the academics in this area of research have been based in the United States or the United Kingdom, so I sought to engage scholars based in other nations from across the world, and also to encourage submissions and co-authors from early- and mid-career researchers, not just senior faculty. You will see from the list of contributors that the book benefits from a global set of authors at various stages of their careers.

I hope this book helps to encourage critical discussion of the research agenda for digital politics by fostering a stronger marketplace of ideas for lone researchers as well as teams of academics working in this field. There is no expectation that this book will affect what academics think about these areas, but it might well have a heuristic role in helping academics to determine what topics and approaches to think about as they go about their own agenda-setting for their research, their field, and for the public interest in an area of vital concern across the globe.

William H. Dutton
Oxford
May 2020