Politics, Policy and the Internet

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SUMMARY

- Just as television and radio transformed the way politics operated in the twentieth century so in the future will the internet have a profound effect on the language and conduct of politics and policy. This will be a **gradual and inexorable** phenomenon.

- The internet has already had an impact on politics. But **in the UK, it is underdeveloped** compared to many other countries, in particular the US.

- In particular, British political parties have failed to embrace this new opportunity. The **British National Party website has the same market share** as all of the other major political parties combined.

- The parties could reverse this by altering their mindset **from "send" to "receive",** by learning the lessons of unofficial organisations such as bloggers, activists and campaign groups which have exploited the potential of the internet.

- The internet will bring a **far greater openness to politics**. The power of search will enforce consistency and depth in both policy and communication of policy. And the tone of debate will, at least in many cases, remain lively, anti-establishment and original.

- For the **activist and the citizen**, the internet will increasingly be used to hold politicians to account and to enable like-minded

groups (such as the those opposed to road pricing) to develop potent single-issue campaigns.

- The web could also **re-empower MPs**, by linking them far more directly to the concerns of their constituents. Most have, so far, failed to grasp this opportunity.

- For **policy development,** the internet will bring greater scrutiny; and greater access to official government data could revolutionise the way policy-making works.

- Should the vision of leading thinkers on both the Labour and Conservative sides be translated into reality, then the internet should become the **key forum for proposing and organising support for new policies**.

- The most subtle, but perhaps most powerful, change, will be to the public's mindset. As we grow used to the instant availability of information online, we will no longer tolerate delay and obfuscation in getting similar information from government. **The individual, and not the state, will be the master in the digital age.**

INTRODUCTION

IN JANUARY 2007, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama launched their bids for the most powerful position in the world. But there was no bunting or cheering crowds. Instead, both candidates for the US Presidency made their announcements in a manner inconceivable just a few years ago: they released videos on their websites.

The growth of the internet is transforming economies and societies across the world. Inevitably, this will reshape the world of politics and government. Partly, this will be in terms of the online delivery of public services. But it will also mean a transformation in the way in which policy is made, and politics is carried out.

Consider the vexed issue of party funding. The British Labour Party was recently thrown into turmoil over £650,000 in donations, an indirect consequence of its reliance on trade unions and wealthy businessmen for funding. In the UK, this is considered a natural, if regrettable, state of affairs. Yet in America in 2004, the Howard Dean campaign's pioneering use of the web helped raise $50 million from 600,000 supporters – a quarter of them under the age of 30.[1] This set a pattern followed eagerly by those in the 2008 contest.

Many scoff at the idea that there could ever be a similar state of affairs in the UK. But the influence of the internet on politics is

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[1] J Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything*, William Morrow, 2004.

bound to increase inexorably, if only because today's teenagers, the "digital natives" entirely comfortable with online communication, are tomorrow's voters – and politicians. For them, the divide between online and offline will be meaningless: political activity will be carried out seamlessly across both.

As an illustration of this, consider the role of technology in transforming politics in previous generations. Once, it was an advantage to be a master of rhetoric – a man such as Pitt, who could command the Commons, or Gladstone, whose oratory could stir up a crowd of thousands. A politician's appearance mattered less than their ability to work within the Houses of Parliament, to get on with colleagues, or to shine at hustings meetings.

In the television age, by contrast, image became far more important – as a sweating Richard Nixon, fresh out of hospital, discovered in his 1960 Presidential debate against the smooth-cheeked John Kennedy. Communication was more intimate: the fireside chat or radio address let leaders talk to voters one-to-one, while advertising, in the form of party political broadcasts, became more emotional, more direct and more confrontational. As the press became ever more pugnacious, the ability to win the House round with your words became less important than the ability to face down a Paxman or a Humphrys.

These changes did not happen overnight. The Coronation might have brought television into people's homes, but it took decades for its greatest political practitioners – Margaret Thatcher and, above all, Tony Blair – to emerge, and for politics to re-orient itself fully around this new form of communication. So it is, and will be, with the internet. As Bill Gates has said, we tend "to overestimate how much things will change in the next two years, and… underestimate how much things will change in the next 10 years"[2]. In other words, while over-optimistic predictions about the immediate future tend to be proved false, new technology –

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[2] www.microsoft.com/presspass/exec/billg/speeches/1997/CEOBill.aspx

sites such as YouTube or Google, for example – does genuinely affect the way society operates.

Gordon Brown and David Cameron will not abandon Prime Minister's Questions in favour of vituperative email exchanges any time soon. Nor will party policy be determined by online votes of the membership. Yet both politicians and parties will have to alter radically their approach if they are to prosper in the online age.

CHAPTER TWO

A ROUGH GUIDE TO THE POLITICAL INTERNET

BEFORE ENGAGING IN SUCH FUTUROLOGY, however, it seems sensible to map the contours of the political internet as it currently exists. The first thing to point out is that according to the Office for National Statistics, a far smaller proportion of the population than might be supposed have internet access: 15 million UK households in 2007, representing 61% of the population.[3] The overwhelming majority of these – 84% – now have high-speed broadband access of one kind of another.

To draw an international comparison, the UK and the US have broadly similar levels of internet penetration – 67% of Britons use the internet in one way or another, compared with 71% of Americans. But in both countries, there are sharp divisions in terms of age and income. In America, 90% or more of adults in households earning $50,000 or more use the internet, compared with 49% of adults in households with less than $30,000 annual income. In the UK, the situation is similar: in 2006, 51% of those earning up to £10,400 had never used the internet, compared to 6% of those on £36,400 or more.

The breakdown in terms of age is even starker. For all the talk of "silver surfers", 71% of those aged 65 and over in this country have never used the internet. While this is a significant improvement on the 82% figure from the previous year, a clear

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[3]   See statistics.gov.uk; US figures from Pew Research
      (www.pewinternet.org)

majority of retirees are excluded from the online conversation. As we go down the age range, internet use grows rapidly – only 35% of those aged between 55 and 64 have never gone online, falling to just 4% of the digital near-natives in the 16 to 24 bracket.

Details of the internet's growth, however, fail to capture the rapid transformations that have taken place in its use. After the September 11 attacks, only 3% of Americans turned to the internet as their primary source of news. By 2002, 7% per cent of Americans used it as such; by the 2006 mid-term elections, 15%. In Britain, too, the traditional media is losing its primacy as a source of information: the most recent Social Attitudes Survey reported that only 50% of us read a morning newspaper at least three times a week, as opposed to 77% in 1983; of those who do not read a paper, only 3% – a shockingly small total – visit those papers' websites.[4] Of course, these readers might not be turning to other websites instead; but those who do embrace the online world tend to become far more active than the passive audiences of old: in 2006, just under a quarter of those actively engaged with the US election campaign used the web to create or forward comments and videos.

This increase in participation is not confined to politics. Social networks, which rely on their users to produce their own content, have exploded in popularity. Half of the UK population regularly use instant messaging or are members of social networks (there are currently 25 million registered UK users of these, a figure which will probably be out of date within weeks). Although only a twentieth of the traffic to political parties' websites comes from social networks, this is growing rapidly: the number following links from Facebook is 23 times larger than it was at the start of 2007. And what happened with social networking could easily happen with another site: the Google, YouTube or Facebook of the future will grow with equally startling speed.

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[4] Published by the National Centre for Social Research (www.natcen.ac.uk)

Politics lags behind

This growth is impressive, but politics seems to be struggling to keep up. Although traffic levels and figures are hard to obtain, due to a multiplicity of methods and means of appraisal (page views, length of visit, unique users etc) it is possible to use what data is available to construct a rough hierarchy.

What is clearest is that the traffic figures for the websites of the major parties make grim reading: between July and December last year, data firm Hitwise calculated that there was an online market share of 0.00012% for the Green Party website, 0.00018% for Labour, 0.00043% for the Lib Dems and 0.00051% for Labour. The Conservatives had double the visits, with 0.001% per cent – but the BNP was double their level again, on 0.0022%.[5]

Market Share of Websites of Political Parties
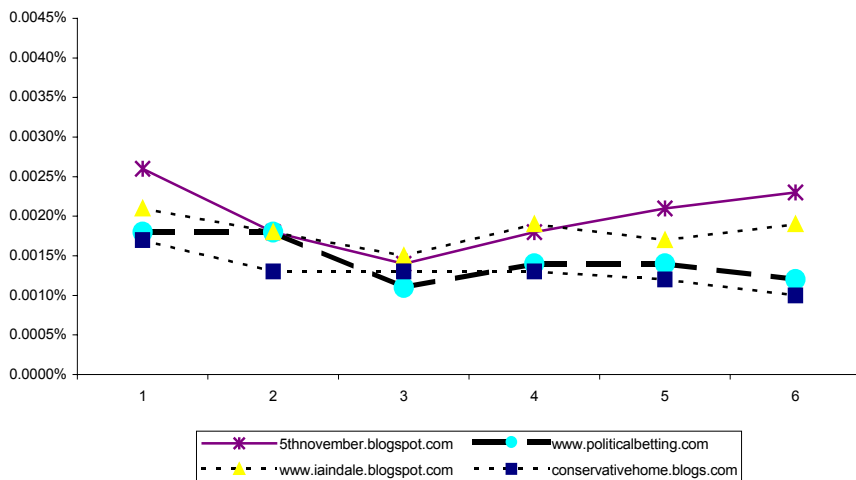
Source: Hitwise Ltd. Data shows monthly market share of sites of all categories, measured by visits, based on UK usage.

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[5] Traffic statistics collected for the author by Hitwise and telegraph.co.uk

The gap in the market left by the political parties has been filled partly by unofficial sites, and partly by those affiliated to the mass media. Of the sites on the Right, the largest and best-known are Guido Fawkes's gossip and rumour site, the blog of Conservative activist Iain Dale, Mike Smithson's analysis site, Political Betting, and Tim Montgomerie's ConservativeHome. (Data for a range of political sites collected by Hitwise suggests that *The Daily Telegraph's* blog site, which the author posts on, has pulled away from this pack slightly, although the political content is only part of what it offers.)

Market Share of Websites of Leading Blogs
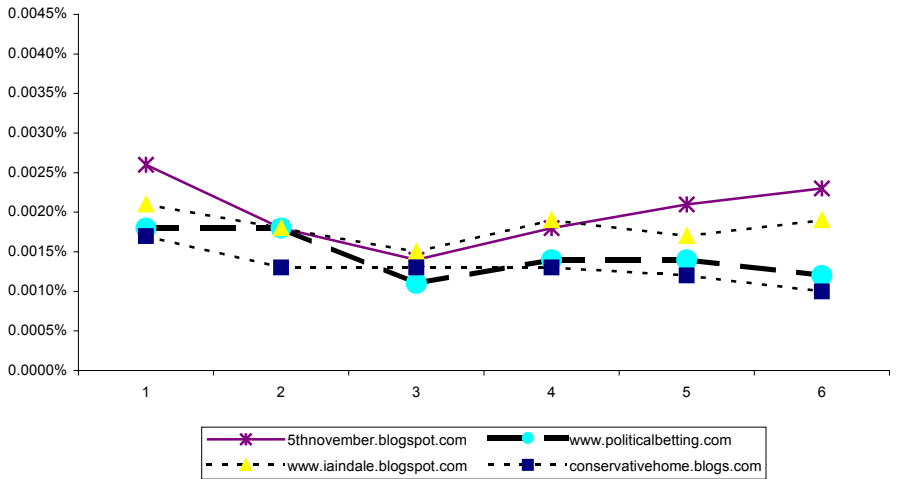
These sites all enjoy a similar range of market share. Far below them (and fitting in with the pyramid structure of blogging[6]) are a sample of other blogs: Bloggers4Labour, LabourHome, Ben Brogan's well-regarded blog for *The Daily Mail* and Tom Watson

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[6]   See next chapter.

MP's long-standing blog are all attracting very small audiences (the y-axis scale is the same as in the previous two charts to facilitate comparisons of market share).

Market Share of Websites of a sample of other Blogs
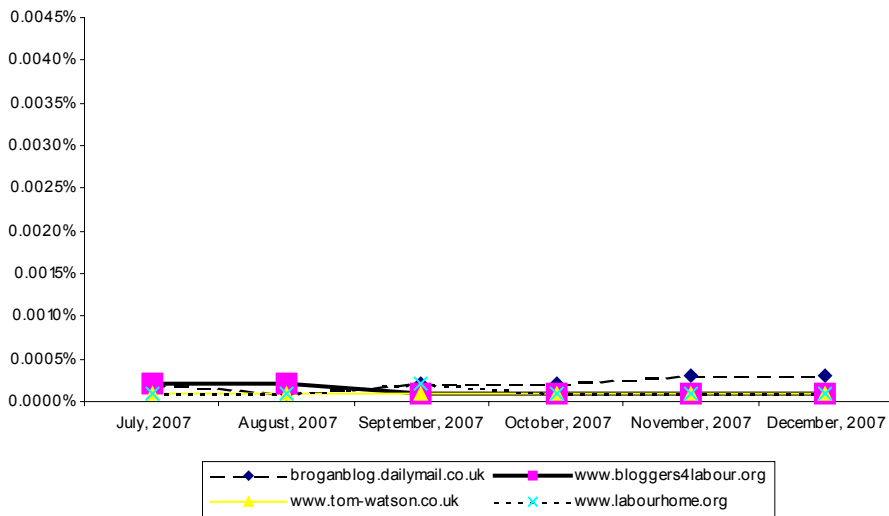
There are obviously hundreds of other blogs that could have been selected – Comment Central from *The Times*, for example, or Burning Our Money, or Dizzy Thinks, or Lib Dem Voice, or Slugger O'Toole, or Recess Monkey and so on and so forth. Similarly, the statistics are only from one firm, and could be contradicted by using other metrics.

But even we accept that measurements given are only approximate, they still paint a picture of a blogosphere that has not yet found its voice. This is particularly apparent when the comparison to the US is drawn. In terms of market share on Hitwise, and the ratings given by Complete.com and Alexa (based on the small sample of web users who use its toolbar), American blogs comfortably outstrip the British. At the time this research

was conducted, The Huffington Post ranked 468th in terms of websites in the US on Alexa, with at least a million viewers per month. The Drudge Report was 200th; the Daily Kos 749th. The top 100 liberal blogs, as of 2005, were receiving more than 15 million page views per week between them.[7] These figures are orders of magnitude above their British equivalents – Iain Dale's Diary, for example, was ranked 6,262[nd] by Alexa among UK sites (although this is admittedly a fairly approximate measurement, the generalisation holds true when examining other measurement methods).[8]

So bloggers have a long way to go before they displace the mainstream media – to compare, *The Daily Telegraph's* main site outstripped its blogging component comfortably, placing 84th among UK sites and 621st in the US (making it, and other UK newspapers, surprisingly influential across the Atlantic – indeed, data from analysis firm comScore has shown that as of November 2007, the BBC, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Times* and *Daily Mail* were all getting more than half of their online readers from overseas).[9] There are not even the "neutral", non-partisan political advice sites along the lines of Smartvote in Switzerland and StemWijzer in the Netherlands. These sites use sophisticated software to match voters' beliefs to one of the multiplicity of political parties (the former had 800,000 visitors in three days, in a country with just five million electors; in the 2006 election season, the latter gave 4.7 million suggestions to 3.5 million voters, from an electorate of 12.2 million).[10]

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[7]   www.mydd.com/story/2005/7/7/184341/5955

[8]   Details from Hitwise, Alexa.com and Complete.com

[9]   blogs.pressgazette.co.uk/wire/1779

[10] www.enews.ma/website-aims-help_i74359_7.html;
      www.waporisrael2007.com/abstracts/KleinnijenhuisWAPOR07.pdf

Perhaps this gap in the market is because the UK has fairly clear dividing lines between relatively few political parties, so such advice is surplus to requirements. Yet these international comparisons suggest that the political internet has failed to take off in the UK as strongly as it has in other countries. One explanation is the massive size of the BBC News website, which dominates the online media space – Hitwise's data shows that for every British political party, at least 40% of visitors arrive via Google (30% or more) or BBC News, with others providing a tiny fraction of visitors.

In other words, the online political space in the UK is not as developed as it could be, and most probably will be. It is easy to measure the extent of this disengagement: until he became Prime Minister, and for much of the time afterwards, Gordon Brown was less searched for on Google than Chantelle, the non-celebrity who won Celebrity Big Brother in 2006.[11]

Indeed, while it is fun to compare the shifting popularity of searches for Gordon Brown, Tony Blair, David Cameron, Menzies Campbell et al, it is also rather instructive: it confirms that even if people are not interested in politics, they are interested in what it can do for them. "Exam results" beats "Prime Minister's Questions"; "Council tax" trounces "Gordon Brown"; "NHS" utterly eclipses "Parliament"; "Library opening hours" wins out over "Downing Street petitions" and is roughly on a par with "Question Time". When considering the effect of the internet on politics, it must be remembered that most people are not Westminster anoraks: what engages them will be local issues and concerns, and causes that may have only a glancing connection to the established infrastructure of politics.

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[11]   Data from Google Trends – www.google.com/trends.

THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION: THE BULLYING BLOG?

THE ONLINE POLITICAL WORLD is still in the early stages of development. But there are already many, especially those who have spent their lives and made their careers offline, who are discomfited by what they see: more tribalism, more outrage, more *ad hominem* attacks; less consideration of nuance, of shades of grey, of the feelings of those not invited to the great online party.

It is certainly true that there are those left out of these new conversations. Of those currently at university, 97% are internet users (which, as suggested above, makes an understanding of the online world imperative for politicians for reasons of basic demography). Yet, as made clear earlier, the overwhelming majority of those aged over 65 have never gone online, while others are restricted by income from doing so as often as they might like.

So first of all, online debate excludes much of the population due to the limitations of culture and infrastructure. But if we look at those who *are* debating online, an alarming picture emerges. Bloggers, the most noticeable manifestation of this new style of communication, are zealous in their insistence that theirs is a democratic, equal-opportunity world: anyone, after all, can start a blog (aggregator site Technorati now tracks more than 112 million of them). But not everyone can find an audience. Blogs tend to be organised in a hierarchical fashion, with a few hubs – such as ConservativeHome or Iain Dale's Diary on the Right – receiving the lion's share of attention, which they feed down to smaller outfits. Their owners form an élite – one which privileges those that have the time, resources, contacts and skill with prose to take part.

Worst of all, say the critics, is the style of debate that this new arena fosters. The blogs are good at trashing things – at pointing out when mistakes have been made or rules broken, as Guido Fawkes did with his coverage of John Prescott's love life or Gordon Brown's links to the Smith Institute. But winning attention online means being the most informed, or amusing – or simply vitriolic. While the writing on the leading political websites is generally extremely good, the comments below, both on individual blogs and sites operated by the mainstream media, can rarely be described as sober and reasoned.

This highlights another potential problem with the internet – tribalisation. In the old days, there were relatively few ways to get your information – local and national papers, a handful of radio and television stations. As a result, most people ingested much the same news in much the same style. Central to this in British political discourse was the deliberately dispassionate voice of the BBC, which, whatever your views about the political leanings of its output, certainly attempted to be, and presented itself as, objective. (One intriguing theory is that this partially accounts for the manageralism of British politics, in contrast to the red-blooded ideology of America.)

In the US, even the most politically engaged person can go through the day without encountering an opinion with which they disagree – a right-winger could start the day with Fox News in the morning, followed up with *The Wall Street Journal*, before moving online to the Drudge Report, Little Green Footballs and so on and so forth; a Left-wing web-surfer could immerse himself in the Daily Kos, Huffington Post, *The New York Times* and even the online offerings of *The Guardian* or *The Independent*. And as media providers multiply and audiences fragment, the same is becoming true in Britain. *The Daily Telegraph*, for example, has started its own online TV service to provide, in the words of its editor-in-chief, Will Lewis, "a different sort of programming for the millions

of people in the UK who don't believe in the left-wing prism. The internet is incredibly liberating in that respect."[12]

The power of these tribes to sway political parties can be significant. In *The Argument*, US journalist Matt Bai charts how blogs such as the Daily Kos and the activists of the "netroots" became so influential.[13] He describes how Mark Warner, an early favourite for the Democratic nomination for 2008, withdrew from the race, partly to spend time with his family, but also, Bai suspects, because he was uncomfortable with how partisan he would have to become to appease a set of online activists who viewed accommodations with Republicans as axiomatically wrong. Warner found, says Bai, that "the Web wasn't simply a new tool for old politics; the blogs represented their own distinct political culture… not a place where townspeople came to consider carefully what their leaders had to say, but where the mob gathered to make its demands and mete out its own kind of justice." Donors motivated by ideology rather than the prospect of access and influence have revitalised the Democrats – but they have also pushed the party into a position where any collaboration with Republicans is seen as traitorous and deeply immoral (witness the recent attacks on Barack Obama for expressing admiration for Ronald Reagan).

The most alarmist position is taken by Adam Curtis, the documentary-maker behind *The Power of Nightmares*, who believes that tribalisation is bad not only for the partisan audience, which becomes increasingly entrenched in its own opinions and disdainful of those of others, but for "neutral" media outlets, too.[14]

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[12]   www.guardian.co.uk/business/2007/sep/15/citynews.musicnews

[13]   M Bai, *The Argument: Billionaires, Bloggers, and the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics*, Penguin, 2007.

[14]   www.theregister.co.uk/2007/11/20/adam_curtis_interview/

Quite frankly, it's quite clear that what bloggers are is bullies… they're deeply emotional, they're bullies, and they often don't get out enough. And they are parasitic upon already existing sources of information… instead of leading to a new plurality or a new richness, [online conversation] leads to a growing simplicity. The bloggers from one side act to try to force mainstream media one way, the others try to force it the other way. So what the mainstream media ends up doing is it nervously tries to steer a course between these polarised extremes.

I've talked to news editors in America. What they are most frightened of is an assault by the bloggers. They come from the left and the right. They're terrified if they stray one way they'll get monstered by bloggers on the right, if they stray the other way they'll get monstered by bloggers from the left. So they nervously try and creep along, hoping not to disturb the demons that are out there.

Curtis's comments are surely unfair, particularly about the psychology of the bloggers. But there is still a nagging feeling that those most empowered by the revolution have been those outside the mainstream – people, in the unkind words of a rival of Howard Dean, who resemble the creatures in the bar scene in Star Wars. The end result could be that politics becomes ever more tightly controlled and anodyne, as politicians attempt to avoid offering hostages to fortune, for fear of their error or gaffe ending up as a YouTube staple (as with Senator George Allen's reference to a part-Indian supporter of one of his rivals as "macaca", an ethnic slur, which ended his career). But even this might not help, given the way that conspiracy theories can flourish in the online hothouse. E-mails accusing Barack Obama of being a Muslim were circulated across America, and gained currency, despite lacking any element of truth whatsoever.

THE CASE FOR THE DEFENCE

ULTIMATELY, THE CRITICISMS made in the previous chapter come down to three things:

- that the internet is exclusive;

- that it fosters partisanship;

- and that it makes genuine debate impossible.

Yet every one of those criticisms is either outweighed – or simply disproved – by its revolutionary potential to be used for good. In the case of Senator Allen, for example, it might be irritating to be filmed by one's opponents day and night. But it is surely a good thing that racist comments are publicised and their originator punished at the ballot box.

In fact, there are two factors which above all else make the growth of online politics a good thing. The first is the openness that the Internet not only brings, but enforces – what one might call "the Google effect". The second – paradoxically, given what has been mentioned about blogging – is the communication style that it fosters: abusive, yes, but above all lively, witty, engaged and *human*.

Consider the way political parties currently communicate. Messages are honed by focus groups and back-room teams, then delivered so as to jam the soundbite into the listener's mind: "Education, education, education"; "British jobs for British workers"; "It's time for change". Such utterances are not designed to further the debate, but to crystallise a sentiment for a TV bulletin

or newspaper headline. Furthermore, if the tone of conversation on the internet is less than optimal, then the ritualised slanging matches between presenters and evasive politicians on Newsnight or the Today programme, are scarcely more edifying.

Joe Trippi, who managed Howard Dean's campaign in 2004, makes an intriguing point about this. In his recent book, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, he points out since 1960, the turnout for Presidential elections has fallen by 15%, while spending per election has mushroomed to approach $2 billion.[15] This, he thinks, is partly because television, and in particular its advertising, only offers enough time for one or two visceral images to linger. Hostile ads are the most effective – but measurably dent the viewer's faith in politics in general. "The best ads," he writes, "are the ones that fail the country most."

The situation is different in the UK, because political advertising is strictly rationed. But Trippi's point is a good one: televised politics has become about the image as much as the content. Yet online discussion is all about the content. It is not enough to paste a few soundbites on to a page – you have to make a convincing argument, and then defend it from those who comment. And crucially, the conversation doesn't end because you, the politician, ended it – those who responded can carry on talking amongst themselves, unless their comments are moderated out of existence.

It is difficult to think of any format of debate that rivals this. Even in traditional public meetings, where there is the benefit of face-to-face interaction, the format is still top-down: the figure of power sits on the stage, answering questions as he or she sees fit. Questioners cannot, for example, break off halfway through to take each other up on their most interesting points. With sensible moderation, hecklers, too, are less of a nuisance online – their contributions can be deleted before they even reach the screen.

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[15] J Trippi, op. cit.

Equally important and powerful, however, is the tone of voice the internet rewards. Blogs, and online communication, work best when they are the "unedited voice of a single person", according to the internet guru Dave Winer.[16] Humour, charm and passion can all be conveyed brilliantly – but pomposity and deadening PR-speak will lead readers to click elsewhere. In other words, there is a premium on honesty and sincerity (or at least the appearance of such) that could well breed a more engaging – and popular – kind of politician. Consider the meteoric ascent of Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas whose main credentials for the presidency initially appeared to be a miracle diet plan and the endorsement of action star Chuck Norris. Gov Huckabee might be open to attack on many of his positions, but his warm tone, palpable sense of humour and brilliant use of the internet (as in a video filmed with Norris that riffed on a cult website, The Chuck Norris Fact Generator) struck a chord with voters, and propelled him from the also-rans in the 2008 race to the front-runners.[17]

Just as important as this more appealing tone of voice is the Google effect – the power of search. What this means is simply that anything anyone says will still be available years later. Already, embarrassing material from social networking sites is being used against politicians – as Jonathan Freedland of *The Guardian* has pointed out, George Bush and David Cameron's student hell-raising would still be in the public domain if they had been using Facebook. Eric Schmidt, the search giant's chief executive, gleefully announced that "Google's going to drive these politicians crazy", whether that be through the use of algorithms that can automatically cross-reference and detect falsehoods and inconsistencies in their statements, or real-time charts of the issues voters are searching about, and therefore most concerned over.[18]

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[16] www.economist.com/surveys/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6794172

[17] 'HuckChuckFacts', available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjYv2YW6azE

[18] www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,2090872,00.html

This might sound like a nightmare for our leaders, but in fact it should privilege transparency and honesty. For example, a politician will not be able simply to change position and deny that a shift has occurred. And any errors in their arguments, or the media's interpretation of what they have said, can be quickly ferreted out as complaints bounce around the blogosphere. This applies not only to gaffes such as Senator Allen's "macaca" comment, but to ill-thought-through policies as well. Now, at political set pieces such as the Budget, the speed with which bloggers analyse specific measures, and feed their findings through to journalists such as the BBC's Nick Robinson, means that dodgy figures can be exposed within hours, rather than days. Charles Kennedy's efforts to save his job collapsed when it was instantly clear, thanks to online polling, that support among his membership had evaporated.

In other words, politics, and the news cycle, is moving ever faster, with less room than ever for spin and evasion and, ultimately, more openness for all. But how will this affect political parties, campaign groups and activists, individual MPs and ordinary members of the public? And how might this change the way in which policy is made?

THE RESPONSE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES

ALTHOUGH EACH OF THE MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES has a solid online presence, none has really taken the internet by storm: more precisely, each remains largely a source of information rather than an online home for party members, activists and interested members of the public (a gap in the market eagerly exploited by other voices). As mentioned above, the amateurish website of the British National Party receives more hits than those of any of the main parties – 51% of all visits to party sites in August 2007 (the Conservatives had 18%, and the Liberals and Labour 7% apiece).[19] This is another sign that opinions from outside the mainstream can flourish online, to the discomfort of many.

Yet this cannot account for the entire disparity: a failure of imagination on the part of the parties must surely be to blame as well. A symptom of this neglect of the internet's possibilities came with the recent Liberal Democrat leadership contest. Neither candidate blogged, and their websites were uninvolving affairs. Chris Huhne's featured the candidate draped strangely across the masthead, with the standard MP-style press releases featured prominently (even repeating the classic formula, 'Chris Huhne today slammed the Government over...'). And while Nick Clegg's had more contributions from bloggers and outside sources, the image chosen of the candidate (captured seemingly mid-yawn) did him few favours.

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[19] Source: Hitwise

But worse than the websites themselves was the lack of imagination. Months into the contest, only *The Spectator* had bothered to buy up such search-engine keywords as "Nick Clegg", "Chris Huhne", "Lib Dems" and "Lib Dem leadership". Clegg's site even announced as its subtitle that it was "*A* site supporting Nick Clegg's campaign to become leader of the Liberal Democrats". On one level, this was understandable: they were hoping to imply that a constellation of other sites were backing the Clegg campaign. Yet there was nothing to indicate that this was *the* official site: a casual surfer would have found nothing on Google or elsewhere that claimed to be Clegg's official homepage.

In fact, a basic lack of agility permeates all the parties' online offerings. Why have the Tories not claimed online ownership of the phrase "clunking fist"? Why are the videos on the Labour Party's YouTube channel – "Labour Vision" – almost entirely composed of rather dull ministers making rather dull points and answering rather dull questions? An honourable exception is the Tories' award-winning WebCameron site, on which David Cameron posts videos and answers questions (or has his team answer them in his name). But even then, the last listed upgrade to the site's infrastructure was back in May, and traffic has trickled away.

An examination of the situation overseas shows how British parties could change their approach in a simple way. Essentially, British politicians are still in what Tim Montgomerie of ConservativeHome has called "send mode" – in other words, they are using the internet to distribute their point of view, as they have for decades. The step change to make is the transition to "receive mode" – asking your viewers and supporters what they think, and shaping your policies accordingly. In the commercial context, magazine publisher David Hepworth put it clearly when writing about his industry:[20]

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[20] www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/nov/19/pressandpublishing.digitalmedia

The web… is about the users and not editors. The former group are always stranger and more diverse than the latter group ever give them credit for. The most you can do on the web is provide a place where they like to gather. You're the hosts and it's your place but you don't really make the rules. You seek to steer the behaviour but in the end this will actually be decided by the people. If you've developed a site where your staff are providing more than 5% of the material then that's not a site at all. It's advertising. And it's probably unsustainable.

Admittedly, entering "receive mode" has its problems. For example, any controversial suggestions would be seized upon by opponents. Yet the advantages stack up. The revenue-raising prowess of the Dean campaign has been noted, but as important was the energy provided by these self-organising "Deanie Babies", the supporters who gathered together online after the Dean campaign put a link on its website to the site Meetup.com to allow them to connect with each other (432 supporters became more than 190,000 in just a few months). They provided not just money, but advice as well – advertisements and posters were honed and improved by online supporters, who also came up with their own versions.

There is of course a difference in culture between British and American political parties. It is impossible to envisage a British group matching the $4 million that the netroots-driven campaign of libertarian Republican Ron Paul raised in a single day last year, both because the UK does not have the same culture of constant electioneering and because of the general "philanthropy gap" that sees Americans donate far more to causes of all description. Also, the effective ban on televised political advertising in the UK means it is harder for parties or campaigns to use television advertising to drive people to websites that collect more money to pay for more advertising. But it is still telling that, amid endless squabbling about party funding, only one of the three major British parties, Labour, has a "Donate today" link high up on its website.

"Receive mode" has another consequence: the party is no longer the be-all and end-all, but merely the centre of a movement – a network of activists. It does not matter whether voters view your site, or see your content elsewhere – as a YouTube video embedded on a blog, for example. Nicolas Sarkozy is a master of such campaigning. During the French elections, he answered 1,500 questions posed by voters on debat-sarkozy, a question-and-answer thread on the Digg ratings site (the questions were rated by visitors to the site for interest, with the candidate addressing the most popular). The campaign produced hundreds of short films, following Sarkozy around France, and also had close contact with approximately 1,000 bloggers, with roughly 100 – from all sides of the political spectrum – visiting their headquarters every week. In America, likewise, putting existing bloggers on your staff is now seen as an essential campaign tool.[21]

This burst of activism has the potential to strengthen a party greatly, not least by re-empowering those stuck in constituencies which are safely held by the opposition. Somebody of a contrarian disposition who has lived all their life in a safe Labour or Tory seat, and felt excluded from politics as a result, suddenly has an opportunity to actually feel involved with the debate within their party. Tim Montgomerie cites the case of the Tory who emailed him from Scarborough to thank him for setting up ConservativeHome and allowing him a voice; MoveOn.org, the left-wing US site, has succeeded in part because it enables Red-staters who hate George Bush to communicate with like-minded individuals, and vent the frustration they cannot express to their Republican neighbours.

Is this a way for British parties to rescue themselves from declining support, and declining turnout? Alex Hilton, founder of LabourHome, has made the point that soon, they could have no

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[21] www.loiclemeur.com/english/2007/05/closing_the_sar.html

choice: as membership tumbles, the numbers willing to trudge the streets come election time will be too small. The only way to make contact with the voters will be to turn to email lists.

The internet and the single issue enthusiast

Such lists, a mainstay of campaigning in America, will also become increasingly important in relation to the growth of single-issue politics. While people might not identify whole-heartedly with a particular party, they may feel passionately about Europe, or lower taxes on business, or freedom from regulation for a beloved hobby, such as shooting or fishing. Parties are more likely to win these individuals' support by targeting them over such specific issues – and what better way to do this than via the internet? Already, people have filtered themselves into interest groups, whether on Facebook, or Yahoo Groups, or any website you care to name. All a politician has to do is reach out to – or microtarget – that constituency.

Of course, there is a danger here – and politicians are often better at pointing out pitfalls than embracing opportunities. If parties become essentially coalitions of the like-minded, rather than centralised, disciplined machines, the danger of negative publicity from someone going "off message" is greater than ever. There is also the spectre of manipulation – of Conservative Central Office workers flooding the forums, posing as ordinary members of the public, to eulogise "Dave" in an ever-so-casual, word-of-mouth manner (a common, if thoroughly dishonest, practice in the marketing world).

Yet the benefits, in terms of increased support, resources and creativity, more than outweigh these – as Trippi has said, it is absurd to think that a few people within the party's offices have a monopoly on good ideas. And engaging with the online world also carries a nice bonus: it gives the impression that you are a party that is comfortable with technology and modernity; an aura that you are, as politicians must be, someone who looks to the future,

not the past. You do not have to go to WebCameron, for example, to know that David Cameron has set it up, and be impressed by the fact.

In the end, embracing "receive mode" could be as much about survival as opportunity. In *The Argument*, Matt Bai lays out a convincing case that after 2004 the Democratic Party was effectively hijacked by twin revolts from its super-rich donors, tired of being treated as "ATMs on legs"; and from netroots activists, frustrated with the compromises and triangulation that the party had clung to since the Clinton years. It is not hard to imagine how similar frustrations – and a similar insurrection – could break out within the ranks of one, or more, of the main parties in Britain.

THE RISE OF THE ACTIVISTS

A POLITICAL PARTY CAN, as argued above, use the internet to become a more agile, open, decentralised entity, appealing to people through single issues and lively, intelligent prose. But that definition also applies to the activists and campaigners who are already making a noise online. In fact, the blogosphere is the most obvious, and most successful, manifestation of the political internet thus far – hence, perhaps, the vitriol of some of the attacks made against it (in Italy, it has so unsettled the élites that a law is being proposed to force bloggers to register with the state).

In the US, the blogs are already a vital element in the debate within parties, and in satisfying their voracious financial demands. MoveOn.org, the US liberal meeting-place, had amassed three million members and a $25 million annual budget by the end of the 2004 election (in a neat illustration of how the distinctions between on- and offline are immaterial to such groups, their chief motivating tool is to use the internet to organise gatherings at members' houses where like-minded neighbours can come to vent their spleen about President Bush). Such has been the success of such new groups that Tim Montgomerie, for one, thinks that the distinctions between parties, campaign groups, blogs and newspapers will blur almost into invisibility over the coming years.

The power of the bloggers and activists also lies in their ability to hold the powerful to account, to pick up and develop stories that the mainstream media may have allowed to fall beneath the cracks. One example, and perhaps the first to illustrate the power

of this new political force, came in the US in 2002. Trent Lott, the Senate majority leader and one of the most powerful men in the Republican Party, made a speech at a 100th birthday party for Senator Strom Thurmond. "I want to say this about my state [of Mississippi]," said Lott. "When Strom Thurmond ran for president [in 1948], we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over the years."[22]

Given that the central plank of Thurmond's campaign had been to strengthen segregation between whites and blacks, these remarks were hugely controversial. Yet the mainstream media largely ignored them – it was left to the bloggers to pick the story up, and circulate it, to increasing outrage, until Lott was forced to recant, and resign his leadership position.

While British blogs have broken news stories – especially the gossip site run by "Guido Fawkes" – they have yet to claim a scalp of similar importance (Guido certainly kept Peter Hain's deputy leadership campaign in the spotlight, but despite his attempts to claim credit for Hain's fall it was a story in *The Guardian*, not a "monstering" from the bloggers, that started the avalanche). However, the blogs have still had an undeniable impact. When Michael Howard, as Conservative leader, sought to amend the party's constitution to reduce the power of the membership to choose the next leader, he was forced to back down after a revolt led by the grassroots readers of ConservativeHome. Websites such as ConservativeHome or MoveOn.org, which oversee endless debates and discussions among their members, will be more attuned to their pet causes (and pet hates) than any other body – and better positioned to exploit them.

In fact, the potential for revolt – for revolution – is one of the most interesting and exciting aspects of the web. The fuel tax protests and the petition-led furore over road pricing (a petition

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[22]   www.archives.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/12/09/lott.comment/

signed by over 1.7 million people) are both examples of issues bubbling up from beneath, co-ordinated not by the established political elite but a random assortment of citizens. With Google, it has never been easier for people to connect to discuss issues they feel strongly about, to form a campaign group and to equip themselves with the research tools to act as a fully fledged think-tank on a fraction of the budget.

Increasingly, too, such campaigners are not merely addressing the powerful within the major parties and the media, but going directly to the people. The simple act of writing the phrase "I want a referendum" on a beach (a recent stunt by the campaign group of the same name) can become a message that reaches thousands of people – particularly when the police trot their horses across the letters in an effort to blot them out.[23] This kind of activity could prove especially significant come election time, especially given the minimal costs involved. The law currently prohibits third parties from spending more than £10,000 in England during a campaign – but if they declare their interest, they can spend up to £700,000. This is an astronomical sum in online terms, particularly if a website has already been built and only has to pay its running costs. If a shoal of such sites developed, it would broaden the political debate far beyond the major parties.

Encouraging debate and participation is, for the activist, the great benefit of the internet. Yes, the tone of the comments can be off-putting, but most of the leading blogs in the UK – if not all – are genuinely interesting and engaging (which is why, of course, they have so many more readers than the parties' offerings). The analysis by Mike Smithson on Political Betting, for example, is the equal of anything in a broadsheet newspaper. And while some might criticise Guido Fawkes for stirring the pot a little, they might be forced to agree that the cosy little world of Westminster could do with a little stirring.

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[23]   See www.guardian.co.uk/politics/gallery/2007/sep/25/1?picture=330816323

Admittedly, these new bloggers form an élite – and one not terribly different from the old élite (Tim Montgomerie, Alex Hilton and Iain Dale, for example, are all Westminster insiders who adapted to new technology, rather than outsiders who crashed the party). But why should this be surprising? If someone is interested enough in politics to make it their obsession, then they will probably want to work in the field already. And not only are they more often outward-looking, and more responsive to comments and suggestions, than the mainstream media, but they provide an environment in which stories and ideas can circulate that could otherwise be ignored by the press. More people talking with more passion about more things is almost axiomatically a good thing for political debate, no matter that the traditional élites find it far harder to control.

THE RETURN OF THE MP

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE the humble MP? Will his or her voice become drowned out by that of the party machine, with all the advantages it possesses in terms of resources, and by the cacophony of bloggers and activists? Perhaps – but is that not the situation already? Many people, to be brutally honest, would not even recognise their own MP, let alone any other figures from the back, or even the front, benches.

There is an alternative. The internet could offer MPs an unmatched opportunity to create a niche for themselves, and to re-empower local politics. This cannot just be done online, of course – as with everything else, it requires co-ordination between online and offline activism.

Most MPs are not taking this opportunity. The British Computer Society's recent MP Website Awards recognised several MPs – Paul Flynn, Boris Johnson, Mike Wood, Derek Wyatt, Richard Spring, Tom Brake, Alan Johnson, Malcolm Bruce, Adam Price, Lynne Featherstone, Richard Benyon, Nadine Dorries and George Galloway – for their online offerings, and shortlisted several more, including Foreign Secretary David Miliband. Yet one of those involved described the experience of trawling through the website of every MP as fundamentally dispiriting: the overwhelming majority had yet to get to grips with the basics of the online world.

But there are some who are thinking about these issues. One MP describes how he has amassed an email list of 6,000 voters.

This might not sound like much compared to the mega-lists used by the campaigns of Barack Obama or Hilary Clinton, but in this case it represents one in 10 of his 60,000 constituents. This is important in two ways. Unlike traditional mailshots or newsletters, this MP does not have to pay hefty printing costs to reach his constituents – he writes out a message, which can be extensively personalised, and clicks on a button. Nor is he simply bragging about his accomplishments, in a manner that will see the missive shoved straight into the bin. He is asking his constituents for their views about issues that effect them – drawing them into conversations rather than hectoring them. In the process, he can become just as attuned to his constituents' feelings as the regulars at ConservativeHome are to those of the Tory base.

Of course, this requires careful judgement. The tone of an email must be different from a press release – more personal, less authoritative. Getting the frequency right, and ensuring that you have permission to send, are also important: no one wants to be bombarded with messages they did not ask for in the first place. "In the world of spam, people don't want unsolicited political emails any more than they want Viagra adverts," says Steve Webb, Lib Dem MP for Northavon and online evangelist.

Yet for motivated MPs, email lists are only the start. Webb also reaches his constituents via text message, Facebook and MySpace. Grant Shapps, Conservative MP for Welwyn and Hatfield, has his own YouTube channel, and a discussion forum that claims to attract 100,000 page views a month. Nadine Dorries, Tory MP for Mid-Bedfordshire, and Tom Watson, Labour MP for West Bromwich East, write lively blogs. Dawn Butler, Labour MP for Brent South, has an annotated Google Map of her constituency on her homepage to point her constituents to where she has been and will be. Sarah Teather, Lib Dem MP for neighbouring Brent, has hooked in a feed from TheyWorkForYou.com, a site that processes the data produced by Hansard, in order to show her constituents what she has been doing in Parliament.

Good campaigning MPs, in other words, realise that there is more than one way to reach out to their constituents – and if those constituents will not come to their website, they will go to them.

This also changes, in a subtle yet fundamental way, the relationship between MP and voter. As Ed Miliband, now head of the Cabinet Office, has pointed out, MPs traditionally hear from their constituents only when they are angry or in need – whether that be by post, or email, or at a surgery or public meeting. Most normal people will never contact their MP, due to constraints of time or motivation. This, naturally, promotes a rather jaundiced view of humanity among our elected officials. Yet by inhabiting the same online spaces as their constituents on a day-to-day basis, MPs will interact with them in much more normal conditions – when the MP is not the privileged voice of authority, but merely one member of a conversation among many. In doing so, perhaps they will get a much more realistic idea of what their constituents actually think. As Joanna Shields, of social networking site Bebo, has said, how can you legislate for and represent people if you don't know what they care about?

Take the case of the Peter Bruff mental health ward at Clacton & District Hospital in Essex. Rumours of its closure sparked concern among locals, causing the local MP, Conservative Douglas Carswell, to make a short online video calling for it to be kept open.[24] Such was the strength of feeling whipped up that the local NHS Trust promptly reassured the MP – and the activists – that the ward was safe. Granted, the campaign did not need an MP to take part – witness the uprising that saw Dr Richard Taylor become the Independent MP for Wyre Forest after a threat to Kidderminster Hospital. But he provided a focus for the short-lived, and successful insurrection.

One of the most important aspects here is the connection between effort and reward. In the old days, even the most active

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[24] www.talkclacton.com/viewtopic.php?t=462

constituency MP could meet only so many of his or her constituents – and there was a limit, given ceilings on spending, to what a skilled hand at editing and producing pamphlets could do for your cause. But the online environment is uniquely rewarding of effort, and damning of half-heartedness. An MP who really masters online communication – updating their blog regularly, joining and participating in discussion groups on issues that concern their constituents – can have a huge impact. An MP who sets up a desultory website and a Facebook account that remains resolutely friendless will gain nothing at all from this vestigial online presence. In other words, the rewards for being an energetic MP, and the potential to stand out against lacklustre colleagues, will be greatly increased.

Independence for MPs

This has one consequence which is excellent for democracy: it insulates good, active MPs to a far greater extent against the travails of their party. Most people vote on a national basis, for or against the Government of the day. But if they have had contact with the MP, either physically or virtually, they are far more likely to have formed a personal impression, whether positive or negative, and to vote accordingly. In other words, MPs can divorce themselves from the image – and the dogma – of their party. Toeing the party line may win you advancement in Westminster, but the internet may help you to enjoy a flourishing local career. If the Party tries to deselect you, all the better – "anti-politicians" such as George Galloway or Middlesborough Mayor Ray Mallon (formerly the local chief of police known as "Robocop") have a decided advantage over those perceived as the creatures of the distrusted Westminster parties. A symptom of this is the suggestion by one MP, who would prefer to remain anonymous, that visits from party bigwigs during by-elections and tight campaigns are positively counter-productive: a candidate is more likely to win if he is not seen trailing after his party leader like a poodle.

THE RETURN OF THE MP

Unfortunately, the internet does give an advantage to incumbent MPs. Party funding rules do not, contrary to general belief, require them to put their official websites into abeyance during election campaigns. Instead, according to Electoral Commission officials, all that is required is for candidates to pay the running costs: in other words, an MP can spend heavily on building himself a cutting-edge online machine, paid for by his Parliamentary communications allowance, and then, at election time, feed into it the carefully garnered email addresses (from political, rather than constituency, correspondence) at minimal cost. And the picture becomes even murkier when you consider the issue of a blog – if a politician has been writing one for years, does it suddenly become a campaign tool? This is "a very blurred line", according to officials – and Ruth Kelly's recent censure for spending her communications allowance on propaganda illustrates how eager politicians will be to blur it further.

Against this, however, is the basic democracy and decentralisation that are at the heart of the web. A rival Parliamentary candidate can, for less cost than ever, set up their own site and gain traction on local discussion groups. The end result could be more partisan point-scoring – but it could also be a more personal, grown-up kind of politics, in which candidates build their own personal brand rather than simply relying on their party's. Of course, risk-averse MPs will shy away from anything that takes them off their pedestal – but the advantages to politicians who embrace this new world could soon persuade them to change their minds.

THE POWER OF THE CITIZEN

THESE OPPORTUNITIES DO NOT APPLY just to MPs, however. They are open to any kind of politician, and, most importantly of all, to those who are not politicians of any kind. A councillor such as Stephen Tall, Deputy Lord Mayor of Oxford, can write a blog about the issues that concern them and that they are addressing[25] – indeed, it might soon be seen as criminally neglectful of them not to do so. But so can an ordinary citizen, with just as much chance of being heard.

Take the case of Laurie Pycroft, a teenager from Swindon. Pycroft has transformed this country's attitude towards scientific testing on animals almost single-handedly. He took on the anti-vivisectionists who were obstructing the construction of a laboratory in Oxford, founding a group called Pro-Test that made the case for the number of human lives that had been and would be saved by such research. And he did so largely from his bedroom, by linking together like-minded people and stirring up debate.

Then there is Saif Osmani, of Upton Park in east London, who took umbrage – as did many locals – over Newham Council's plan to redevelop the Queen's Market area, replacing the street market with a mall containing a new Asda superstore and a series of executive apartments. The resulting campaign, centred around friendsofqueensmarket.org, was able to persuade the councillors and developers to back down.

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[25] www.oxfordliberal.blogspot.com

Both these examples were cited by Matthew d'Ancona in a pair of 15-minute documentaries he recently made for Radio 4.[26] He called the Queen's Market campaign "the most exciting example of grassroots politics I encountered" – but it is not the only one. Eli Pariser started a petition against the Afghan war at 9-11peace.org, which attracted more than half a million signatures within a few weeks and created an email list that became the foundation of MoveOn.org's success. Banking giant HSBC was forced to back down over plans to charge its clients more after a series of protests co-ordinated by groups on Facebook. Those with particular interests – parents of children with special needs, for example – can now go online to find others in a similar situation.[27] David Cameron has called for such parents (in fact, all parents) to be able to set up their own co-operative schools, of which there are already more than 100 in Sweden and 600 in Spain – and the internet makes it far easier for those interested in doing so to find each other.

This is not politics as traditionally understood – or rather, it is not *party* politics. But as Mark Penn, Hillary Clinton's chief strategist, has argued, small groups of people – barely 1% of the population – can use the web to bond over issues that concern them, and band together to campaign about them.[28] Before, the only way for the families of soldiers serving in Afghanistan or Iraq to communicate would be through the Army itself, or their local paper – now, they can all log on to the Military Families Support Group (a site set up by two mothers who lost their sons in Iraq).[29] Or, for an earthier picture of what their relatives are up to, there is the unofficial British Army Rumour Site – the enticingly named arrse.co.uk.

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[26] www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/the_westminster_hour/7112320.stm

[27] For example, www.byparentsforparents.com

[28] See M Penn, *Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow's Big Changes,* Twelve, 2007.

[29] See www.mfsg.org.uk

This circles back to the "Google effect". The internet not only democratises access to information – it links people together. As pointed out above, there are already 25 million members of social networking sites; Bebo, the site most popular among British teenagers, has 7.3 *billion* page views per month, with each visitor spending an average of 32 minutes on the site. Mostly, they are chatting with their friends or making plans for the days ahead. But they can also be galvanised about issues they care about. The site's "Be Cause" awards, which offer £1,000 grants every month to local projects, have attracted almost 600 "friends".

On a larger scale, the Facebook Causes application, which lets users of the site promote and donate to charities and campaigns of their choice, has a quarter of a million active users every day. Although it is only able to fund charities in North America, it has attracted six million users already. Such activism can easily move offline. The website Avaaz.org attracted more than 830,000 people to its campaign against the recent repression in Burma, spending the funds raised to lobby the Chinese Government – Burma's biggest supporter – through advertisements placed in Chinese national newspapers.

This empowerment of individuals is perhaps the most exciting aspect of the way the internet works. The Downing Street petitions website – described by Tim Montgomerie as the most exciting online development in British politics – has attracted several million signatories. Many were spurious – "Borat for PM!" being one example. But others, most notably the protest against road pricing, were genuine expressions of popular grievance of a kind that would not have been possible a few years ago. And they are started not by politicians, or journalists, but by ordinary web surfers who wanted to make their voices heard.

Politics, in other words, is slowly but surely escaping from the hands of the politicians. A symptom is the work of MySociety, the group of altruistic web experts who developed the Downing Street website, PledgeBank, TheyWorkForYou and several other sites

designed to re-energise democracy, and make politicians more accountable. HearFromYourMP, one of their sites that lets MPs address particular questions, is especially interesting, because although it lets the representative initiate the conversation, he or she has to accept that those addressed can also talk among themselves once he has answered. Just as with a blog, the conversation ends when people want it to, not politicians. With another MySociety initiative, to collate local email lists and discussion groups to enable people to track down and talk to those strangers who live nearby, the potential is equally vast – every worthwhile change in society, after all, starts with people talking to each other, and the internet is unparalleled at allowing them to do just that.

THE IMPACT ON POLICY-MAKING

THE INTERNET HAS THE POTENTIAL to transform the way people – both political professionals and ordinary citizens – engage with politics. But it also has profound implications for the world of policy.

Consider the way in which ministers often tailor their speeches to different audiences – putting one gloss on things for *The Mirror*, another for *The Times*, and yet another when appearing on News at Ten. Genuine policy positions are shrouded in a fog of misleading verbiage and hair-splitting nuance, emerging as either meaningless or hopelessly contorted.

The point was made earlier that this type of discourse comes under attack from two separate aspects of the online world. Firstly, the vast archive of material available in fractions of a second via the major search engines makes it far harder to go back on your word – pronouncements made in different places and different times can be compared and contrasted. In other words, your past is always there, and cannot be disowned.

The other issue, as discussed above, is the tone of voice that the internet fosters. Quite simply, the politician-speak that has evolved over recent decades is almost uniquely ill-suited to the internet, which privileges verbal flair and/or straight talking. As the Centre for Policy Studies suggested in a recent pamphlet drawing attention to the worst examples, "euphemism, avoidance and vagueness have come to dominate government announcements, ministers' speeches and every kind of government publication… Familiar words have in

many cases been drained of their original meaning. Others have come to mean their opposite."[30]

But what will this mean for policy? For starters, that people will have to think before they open their mouths – or, if they are changing a policy position, will need to explain more clearly just why and how the alteration has come about. (It is no use saying, "No, Jeremy, my position has not changed in the slightest…" when someone can paste your original comments in the thread below.) If this does not lead to a more ideologically coherent set of policies, it ought certainly to lead to policies which are more intellectual coherent, or at the least more comprehensible to voters.

The impact of the internet need not, however, be limited to the language in which policy is discussed. The processes of decentralisation and democratisation, and the broadening of discussion and debate – in other words, the most powerful aspects of this new technology – could be applied just as much to policy as to politics.

Thus far, practical examples of this have been thin on the ground. Matt Bai's account of the process within the Democrats is a classic case study: a conviction in 2004 that the Democrats needed to fund their own think-tank machine to "shift the needle" of American politics as the Goldwater conservatives did in the 1970s and 1980s became subverted by an obsession with message and manipulation – new wrapping paper for old ideas.

But the starry-eyed rhetoric of some British politicians would have you believe that it is only a matter of time before the internet is used in fundamentally new ways. The rising stars of the Labour and the Conservative Parties, David Miliband and George Osborne, are both evangelical about the power of the internet. Miliband announced in a speech at the Google Zeitgeist conference – and also in a YouTube video recorded during the event – that "the spirit of the age requires a new type of politics",

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[30]   CPS, *The 2008 Lexicon – A guide to contemporary Newspeak*, 2008.

diagnosing a shift from "I need" (the politics of scarcity in the 1950s to 1970s) to "I want" (the politics of individual affluence and enterprise in the 1980s and 1990s) to "I can" (a presumed spirit of co-operation and empowerment fostered by the internet).[31] Not to be outdone, Osborne spoke at the Royal Society of Arts of "recasting the political settlement for the digital age" and called for "open source" government – what he has elsewhere referred to as "Public Services 2.0" (a reference to the "Web 2.0" tag applied to social networks and the like).[32]

But what does any of this actually mean? Both sides seem to envisage citizens coming together online to improve the functioning of public services. Where they differ is on whether such groups would be clients of the state (Labour) or take on its functions themselves (the Tories). Yet the current government vision seems to be less about empowering citizens than amassing information on them. In the aftermath of the scandal over the missing child benefit discs, Rachel Sylvester of *The Daily Telegraph* revealed that Sir David Varney, Gordon Brown's adviser on "public service transformation", is working in the heart of government on a vision of vast databases that can tailor public services to individual need – "a joined-up identity management system" that acts as "a single source of truth" about every individual.[33] (A recent CPS pamphlet by Jill Kirby goes into more detail.)[34]

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[31] www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/ministers/speeches/david-miliband/dm070521.htm

[32] www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=135408

[33] See   www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2007/11/27/do2701.xml.

[34] J Kirby, *Who do they think we are? Government's hidden agenda to control our lives,* CPS, 2008.

This approach is not only opposed to the decentralising spirit that makes the internet so powerful, but also misses much of the point of what this new technology offers. Admittedly, the online debate is more geared towards criticising policies that are considered ill-judged than making nuanced suggestions on how to improve them (although this is no bad thing in a way, as it is always useful to strike down bad measures). But if we take the idea of "Public Services 2.0" – or indeed "open-source politics" – at face value, new possibilities emerge.

The term "Web 2.0", for example, is broadly agreed to describe technology whereby the website offers a set of tools that users can re-interpret as they see fit, in the process providing the content (such as their MySpace pages) that makes the sites a compelling proposition. Facebook's Applications, software modules that can be grafted on by external developers, are a prime example of this in action – they have both been plugged in to software built by others, and rely for their success on content provided by their users. Similarly, the definition of open-source software is that it is open to all to inspect, improve and reimagine – under the Creative Commons licence, people can do whatever they want, so long as they make the results of their work available for all to improve further.

This is as far from the system of governmental policy-making as it is possible to get. Despite the mantra of "consultation", policy is usually formulated deep within the recesses of Whitehall, shown to world in the form of a Green Paper, tinkered with to create a White Paper, then put forward as a law.

An open-source alternative would be different. Measures would be proposed by government, yes – but also by members of the public. These could be scrutinised, line by line, with alternative versions promulgated and debated. Those that withstood the most rigorous scrutiny would then move forward – not on the say-so of ministers or of civil servants, but on that of all those involved in the process.

The tools for such a system would be easy to build – there are already forums set up for similar purposes, but they lack the official imprimatur that will mean people can be sure the government will listen, and that the debates will not become proxies for party political battles. But it would take immense political courage to proceed with them. Such courage was shown to an extent with the creation of the Downing Street petition site: those behind it knew that many of the suggestions would be negative, hostile or embarrassing. A site where policy could be debated would offer the risk of further embarrassment should the Government not get its way – and would need careful management to prevent a descent into abuse and name-calling.

Can we get from here to there? And is it desirable to do so? Parties have made some attempts to open up their policy-making processes – to enter "receive" mode as well as "send". But these have been halting. In the US, a coalition of progressives launched "Since Sliced Bread", a competition to find a great new policy idea for the Democrats – but while there was less abuse than might have been expected from the 100,000 visitors, the ideas tended to retread old ground.[35] The Liberal Democrats' manifesto, which was being put together by Steve Webb until the decapitation of Sir Menzies Campbell, drew upon online debates among the membership – but these took place behind closed doors. The Conservatives launched a website called Stand Up Speak Up to promote the findings of their six Policy Groups – but this was largely an exercise in evaluating documents put together by a council of greybeards behind closed doors, and then voting on which particular proposals were the favourites. More to the point, heady promises made in opposition about openness and freedom of information tend to be quietly shelved once a party enters government.

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[35] M Bai, op. cit.

There is a seed here, however, that can be expanded into something more powerful – particularly if the government's monopoly over policy-making can be ended. A growing number of voices from the worlds of politics and the think-tanks are calling for greater democracy in the way we are governed: in particular, the increased use of local and national referenda and the use of citizens' initiatives to put forward legislation (or even bypass Parliament altogether and put measures directly to a popular vote).[36]

The Downing Street petitions website provides a precedent here, but there is no requirement that those measures be seriously considered. However, in their discussions of constitutional reform, both Gordon Brown and David Cameron have argued that such expressions of popular interest should be put on the political agenda. Brown, for example, stated that:[37]

"[Our system of representative democracy] can be enhanced by devolving more power directly to the people and I propose we start the debate and consult on empowering citizens and communities in four areas.

First, powers of initiative, extending the right of the British people to intervene with their elected local representatives to ensure action – through a new community right to call for action and new duties on public bodies to involve local people."

Offering a more radical vision, Cameron said:[38]

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[36] See for example, M Qvortrup, *Supply Side Politics: how Citizens' Initiatives could revitalise British politics*, CPS, 2007.

[37] "Constitutional Reform Statement", 3 July 2007. See www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page12274.asp

[38] "Power to the People", 6 June 2007. See www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=137003.

"I would like to see a system whereby, if enough people sign an online petition in favour of a particular motion, then a debate is held in Parliament, followed by a vote – so that the public know what their elected representatives actually think about the issues that matter to them."

If such petitions and community action do become engrained in the processes of government, the internet will be a – perhaps the – key forum for galvanising and organising support.

There is a significant caveat here, however. The idea of a "pure" direct democracy has often been floated, in which every decision is taken by the citizens, rather than their elected officials. Normally, online voting is invoked as a key element of the infrastructure for this. But even if the tools were there for this, or a less ambitious scheme for collaborative policy-making, it is doubtful whether it would take off. The main reason is simply the extraordinary volume of legislation that emanates from Parliament, the EU and the various state agencies that have the power to regulate. Even the most engaged and informed members of the public would wilt before the task.

Yet this is not an insuperable problem: it is generally recognised that much of this legislation is ill-thought-through and counter-productive, especially given that Parliament (in particular the House of Commons) no longer has enough time to scrutinise it in sufficient detail. Opening up laws to public scrutiny, and demystifying the policy-making process, would no doubt catch many problematic policies and regulations before they go through. The current furore over a raise in Capital Gains Tax for businesses shows how opposition to such measures can be quickly co-ordinated, and can often force the government to ameliorate its plans.

But there are other ways of accomplishing similar ends – in particular, the liberation of official data. Rather than attempting to conduct each debate on its own terms, the government must – like the parties – be willing to relinquish control, to trust in the

wisdom of the population. One way to do this would be to expand massively the concept of freedom of information. The Conservatives have proposed letting people "Google" the details of every item of public spending above £25,000, and manipulate the data produced. But there is an even more radical solution: altering the entire presumption behind freedom of information, and making every piece of data public automatically, unless there are pressing objections in terms of security or privacy. This suggestion chimes with the philosophy of the "Free Our Data" campaign launched by *The Guardian*, one backed by voices from across the political spectrum.

Putting the mass of raw material churned out by the Government into the public domain in this way could lead to uses for public data that are beyond anything currently imaginable. A stellar example is the idea of "mash-ups" – creating websites that link two compatible data sources in a novel way. There are mash-ups that use mapping websites to plot real-time calls to emergency services, or house prices, or crime levels. There are mash-ups that let you text to find out what time your bus will arrive – an idea subsequently adopted by many local authorities and travel companies. There are mash-ups that detect what book you're browsing on Amazon, and let you know the prices elsewhere as you search. The BBC is attempting to entice developers into using its data at BBC Backstage – but think what could be done with the vast amounts of information churned out by the government: comparing quality of services from different councils, exam results from local schools, survival rates in hospitals, or superimposing polling data on maps linked to ethnicity, income or educational deprivation.

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

THIS STUDY has sought to explain and explore how the internet will gradually, inexorably transform the way politics and policy-making operate in Britain – and to suggest some of the ways in which all of those involved in politics could take advantage of the impact this new technology is having.

The discussion of specific technology has been limited – there have been no tips on the best ways to write a blog, or when to indulge in "vodcasting", or how to win friends on Facebook. But this is because the opportunities available online are shifting so rapidly: the next hit site to follow YouTube or Twitter will ask MPs and others to master a different set of skills and etiquette; they could find themselves using microphones rather than keyboards, or mobile phones rather than PCs. What will remain unchanged, however, is the basic spirit of the internet: that open, lively, mildly anarchic stew of opinion and creativity that has little respect for hierarchy and authority. If those seeking to shape debate do not engage with it on its own terms, they could find themselves ignored, belittled or bypassed.

Then there are the incidental effects of the internet, which will perhaps be even more influential than the first-order consequences considered in this study. One of the things that should both excite and alarm politicians is what the internet does to people's expectations: they get used to sites and services that just, well, work. A Google search takes less than a tenth of a second – so why, the coming generation will ask, should it take

any longer to find out information that is being held by the Government, or even to get a request answered? The public will no longer be put off by press releases, or bland newspeak – they will expect a prompt, simple, intelligible, and above all human response, just as they will receive from their fellows online.

The online world is a faster world, a more chaotic world, and a more confusing world. At times, it can resemble a cacophony – a thousand voices shouting at once, and no one making much sense. But it is also, fundamentally, a more open – and therefore a more honest – one. Politicians have two responses: they can try to tighten control, to avoid any slips that might embarrass them. Or they can embrace this new territory, as their voters surely will.

Because, ultimately, it is not about the technology, but about the people – about reaching them, interacting with them, listening to them. Without their users' input, sites such as MySpace and Facebook would simply be empty vessels. Indeed, the fact that the web gives them this power to express themselves makes it far more powerful than earlier technologies, which only allowed communication from high to low. Half a century ago, the great American journalist Edward R Murrow described the power of television to change the world – but his comments are even more apt when applied to the technology that is supplanting it. As Murrow declared:[39]

> *This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights in a box.*

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[39] See Ed Murrow's comments at www.videosift.com/video/Edward-Murrow-merely-wires-and-lights

WHO DO THEY THINK WE ARE? Government's hidden agenda to control our lives
Jill Kirby
The Government's plan for the 'transformation' and 'personalisation' of public services is based on sharing information across departments and agencies, to provide the state with a joined-up picture of every individual. Citizens are to become 'customers' of the Government, presented with a 'package' of services. This extraordinarily ambitious strategy will entail more central control, less local accountability and less individual responsibility. Instead of breaking up the Whitehall monopolies, it draws more power to the centre.

> *"The wider implications of Mr Brown's 'personalisation' programme are powerfully outlined by Jill Kirby"* – Fraser Nelson, *The Spectator*

THE 2008 LEXICON: a guide to contemporary Newspeak
The Lexicon lists some of the misuses of language that have become all to common in contemporary politics and reveals a lethal blend of management-speak ("strategic framework", "benchmark", "best practice"), therapy-speak ("holistic", "empowerment", "closure") and post-modernism ("narrative", "cultural shift", "truth"). The result, too often, is hollow obfuscation.

> *"That ghastly hybrid patois described in a recent Centre for Policy Studies pamphlet"* – Matthew Parris, *The Times*

SUPPLY SIDE POLITICS: how the Citizens' Initiative could revitalise British politics
Professor Matt Qvortrup
Professor Qvortrup argues that a greater supply of democracy could create a demand for political participation – and thereby address at least some of the malaise afflicting British politics today. Direct democracy does not result in populist legislation and ill-considered laws. Indeed, the reverse is true.

> *"A new pamphlet by the Centre for Policy Studies argues convincingly that this would reinvigorate democracy without leading to illiberal legislation"* – leading article in *The Sunday Telegraph*

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"In January 2007, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama launched their bids for the most powerful position in the world. But there was no bunting or cheering crowds. Instead, both candidates for the US Presidency made their announcements in a manner inconceivable just a few years ago: they released videos on their websites."

Television and radio transformed the way politics operated in the twentieth century. And, predicts Robert Colvile, the internet could do the same in the twenty-first.

Yet the main British political parties are failing to exploit its potential. The BNP website has the same market share as all of the other major political parties combined.

The internet will bring a far greater openness to politics, helping the activist and the citizen hold politicians to account. The web could also re-empower MPs, by linking them far more directly to the concerns of their constituents. And for policy development, the internet will revolutionise the way policy-making works.

The most subtle, but perhaps most powerful, change, may be to the public's mindset. As we grow used to the instant availability of information online, we will no longer tolerate delay and obfuscation in getting similar information from government. The individual, and not the state, will be the master in the digital age.

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