

The Institute of Ideas response to the Hansard Society Commission on Parliament in the Public Eye's Call for Evidence, May 2004

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There is widespread debate today about the potential of information technology (IT) to generate greater access and participation in politics. This submission considers the lessons of this debate for Parliament's Communication Strategy and Accessibility.

IT enables us to experiment with new forms of political debate and participation in immediate and responsive ways. By neglecting political content, however, we risk elevating IT's importance over and above politics itself.

MPs are starting to experiment with their own websites and weblogs and discuss the merits of electronic voting — pointing to a common faith in IT. Through IT, it is thought, the opportunity arises to start redressing the cynicism and apathy toward politics, and listening to what the public wants (or not as the case may be). The forthcoming European and local elections may make matters even more acute. A generally anticipated low turnout will possibly convince many of the need for even more focus on IT.

However there is a danger surrounding the hyping of IT. It could in fact contribute to more cynicism and apathy towards politicians and Parliament by intensifying the disintegration of national politics. While one of the benefits that IT brings is wider access to information and services, importantly it allows politicians to connect with people as individuals and groups, rather than as a public. Any publicly defined agenda (through the open contestation of ideas) is slowly being undermined in a desire to connect with a wider, if more disparate, audience. Ultimately what we are witnessing is the fetishisation of access — *not* inspirational ideas and political leadership.

While we should applaud any advances in IT, we should also contextualise any progress and innovation gained in the generally conservative climate in which politicians seem to be using IT for its own sake. Often the form the debate around IT takes is about creating new *spaces* and models of political participation at the expense of the existing state of affairs. The new-found optimism in technology appears to be about moving away from the traditionally understood public space of politics into myriad *other* spaces and channels that cater for an increasingly diverse set of audiences with their own agendas.

The danger is that without a publicly-defined arena that is robustly argued over, the alternative is a series of continuous debates that occurs in many other forms on the *periphery of politics* — not at its centre. The risk is that IT's influence will exacerbate this — further fragmenting political participation to myriad localised issues and campaigns. The call for 'channels' could easily localise debate — removing any capacity for a nationwide focus to establish the central credibility which seems so sorely lacking.

The use of IT should always be factored against wider goals. In many commercial applications, the drive for new technology becomes both the means and the end. While we should not curb enthusiasm and innovation in IT, the opportunities it offers can quickly become an excuse for not taking a step back and looking at the bigger problem.

In many areas IT can enable a streamlined approach to services and providing more convenient channels, such as in local government. However when the agenda behind the provision of better services is actually about local government, or Parliament, wanting to connect with the population because of its own legitimacy crisis, IT-based initiatives quickly become an excuse for politicians not setting their own agenda. The outcome is reactive pragmatism replacing a coherent range of policies and direction.

In three following examples, I highlight how the initial potential of IT to widen participation becomes problematic when it becomes a substitute for a lack of political direction or agenda.

Weblogging MPs¹

- Weblogs are a world-wide publishing phenomenon used by everyone from teenagers, families, journalists, professionals and companies to politicians. Most are infrequently updated and soon close. Those that don't allow the publisher to create informal networks around ideas and opinion, with unfettered freedom of speech through debate, feedback and response to others' ideas
- Weblogs are very easy-to-use publishing tools with little or no costs. As a kind of online journal, a weblog can become a place where MPs' activities as well as their interests are publicly available for anyone to inspect. Once MPs have started a blog, the pressure is to continue to publish frequently — their audience can hold them to account.
- In the UK a small number of MPs are starting to 'blog', talking to their constituents and people beyond their geographic constituencies, testing out ideas and connecting with previously unreachable audiences.
- The opportunity to connect with voters is irresistible. Weblogs allow ideas to develop with little or no effort or commitment – a virtual free-for-all – which in itself should be defended. However, the enthusiasm and voracity of blogging also says something about a culture where people are less inclined to participate in the same manner elsewhere. The self-reverential style of weblogs appeals to those who have given up on politics in the public sphere proper.

Howard Dean's US Democrat nomination campaign²

- Howard Dean's nomination campaign quickly amassed massive support surpassing his rivals through his website, weblog and through his MeetUp site. He managed to collect funds; instil debate through the internet and encourage supporters to meet up in cities over America and beyond to support his campaign.
- Dean was the first election candidate to utilise the internet as a serious campaigning tool, using webloggers and online campaigners to spread his political message.
- Dean's strength, and also his subsequent failure, was that he handed over the political tools to his periphery of supporters, who facilitated many locally sponsored campaign meetings using MeetUp sites. Many of these meetings had no direct Dean involvement — and were solely made of supporters who expressed anti-Bush and even anti-mainstream political sentiments.
- In the end support for Dean from the massive online consistency quickly withdrew once his campaign funds ran low and when he could not sustain his political credentials in the real world. Because many of his ideas were never contested in the real world, his virtual support could not translate into public support.

BBC's iCan: engaging local civic involvement³

- The iCan initiative provides a space for supporting civic engagement in the wider political process — driven from a local level. From advising about legislation to aiding the creation of campaigns online — anyone can contribute ideas and vote on issues that affect them most.
- Through repositioning the BBC as a facilitator of public engagement, all activities are within a confined framework of rules and etiquette ensuring impartiality and

¹ The first UK MP to start a weblog was Labour MP Tom Watson in 2003. In July 2003 he ran a '24 hour blogathon' — an open invitation to put forward ideas to Labour's election manifesto. See 'Blog standard politics' by the author <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DE9F.htm>

² By October 2003, Dean had amassed over 180,000 supporters through the MeetUp network — meeting across many cities, organising their own campaigns. By the end of the second round of caucuses in February, John Kerry was already ahead of Dean. It took just over one month for Kerry to overtake Dean's initial lead. See 'Dean and not heard' by the author <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/0000000CA3D5.htm>

³ For an overview of the issues surrounding iCan including the changing role of the BBC see 'What iCan can't do' by the author <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DFD3.htm>

responsibility. When there is potential to open up the possibilities of forging new connections, such etiquette imposes restraint on all participants.

- iCan encourages anonymity and campaigning by proxy. And by lowering the barrier to entry — the overall political impact of a potential campaign is reduced, since a serious political debate requires accountability and consequence. Because of the difficulty iCan poses for the BBC in sponsoring political activism, its potential is shunned away into a safe environment.
- iCan's contribution to political campaigning increases fragmentation because of its focus on local issues first and foremost. This, combined with the ongoing difficulty of holding opinions to account online because of the insistence of anonymity, will further diminish its political potential.

The debate seems to be about searching for new ways to generate interest among the public: not just in voting more often, but also in engaging with the political process more generally. While no-one can deny that participation is reaching an all-time low, the crisis is not just one of numbers. Like other traditional institutions, Parliament has less and less credibility and authority. The use of IT is one way politicians are trying to re-establish Parliament's legitimacy by making new connections with the population. The more connections they make, however, the more they expose their lack of ideas. The lack of political engagement is a political problem that will only be solved by political change — not by IT.

About the author

Martyn Perks is a user experience consultant, writer and speaker on design, IT and business.