

Orange: The Future of Politics

In association with the
thefuturelaboratory



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executive summary

The revolution in digital technology has already changed how we communicate and how we do politics. The modern world is one where millions of people sign up to e-petitions, where protestors organise on Facebook, where Britons spend more time online each year than eating and drinking. But the modern world is also a place where MPs still write letters, where political party membership levels have steadily declined over the years and where only 60% of citizens now vote in general elections.

The digital age is just beginning. Soon, 'inline' citizens will move seamlessly between the online and offline worlds, aided by multi-functional handheld devices keeping them always on. Technology's power to connect people could open up Britain's political processes and usher in a new age of mass participation in democracy. It is a huge opportunity.

British politics has begun to adapt to these changes – some MPs are blogging, Blackberries are allowed in Parliament, fundraising is being conducted online. These are positive first steps but to make fundamental changes, greater leaps are needed. The election of Barack Obama in the US has shown the potential rewards for those who successfully adapt.

Orange has commissioned this report to investigate how technology will help politicians help their constituents and how those constituents can collaborate to achieve better political outcomes. Orange believes that together people can do more and nowhere is such collaboration more important than in our democracy.

This report argues for a profound response on the part of UK politicians and political structures; Parliament and political parties need to embrace the digital age to re-energise and transform democracy.

Parliament has to adapt. Its procedures are old-fashioned and crafted for the pre-digital age. As a debating, scrutinising and deliberating chamber it has nearly ceased to function. New technology could allow debates to be based on genuine real-time information; citizens to contribute to bills in progress; additional expertise to be brought into select and bill committees; and virtual meetings to take place with outside experts and constituents. If these things were implemented, then the information asymmetry between government and backbenchers would be challenged; the possibility of the House of Commons resuming its primacy in political life might be restored, and a Digital Golden Age of Parliament would begin.

Political parties must change or wither. They have existed more-or-less in their present form for about 150 years. But they've been mass movements for a much shorter period, reaching their heyday in the 1940s and 1950s. Life has changed since then, but the round of evening meetings, bring-and-buy sales and leaflets has not. These days, single-issue campaigns are what excite people, and groups originate and coalesce around them in the virtual world. It is a universe away from "my party – right or wrong". Political parties have to pay more than mere lip-service to debate and disagreement. MPs who blog frankly should be rewarded and promoted, not sacked. Diversity not uniformity will be the route to success. People's politics are not defined by the party they join and parties will have to be greater and broader to address the wide range of global and local issues that motivate people.

There is a new way to think about party funding. Political parties have grown lazy and uninspired in their marketing because they depend on a few big donors (very wealthy individuals or trades unions). Yet the US has shown another and better way: using the net to generate support from individuals who not only give but feel a sense of participation that our own parties have lost. The result could be a return to the mass movement, but no longer exclusively through annual membership and total commitment.

MPs can matter again. Through new communications technologies, the potential for enhanced dialogue with their constituents is enormous in the digital age. They are more than just lobby-fodder or a face behind a party rosette. Mutual understanding with constituents could lead to a revival of the time when the MP was a local figure of great consequence with a personal vote which withstood wider political turbulence. Those who fail to pick up on this trend will lose their seats in favour of those who devote time to being entirely in tune with the digital population. Like their technologically advanced constituents, MPs will be 'in-line.'

Co-operation will make for better government. Open source is better than proprietary software. More companies are throwing open proprietary systems to the contributions of individuals and seeking the wisdom of crowds. Legislation and regulation remains an exception. After months of consultation with experts, a Bill disappears into an arcane process in which genuine scrutiny is curtailed and MPs sit in Committees frequently dealing with their correspondence rather than examining the legislation. Technology offers us a better way. Texts of Bills (and other government initiatives) could be posted on line and wiki-ed or improved externally. A new concept of MPedia will allow a world of advice from the Wikipedia generation for MPs who are currently reliant on a handful of advisers. Information flows would give all MPs the ability to raise reasoned points – and direct input to the process by outsiders would at least clarify the points of difference. There will still be controversy and argument: but at least on an informed basis.

politics drivers

Communications technology provides the tools to help rekindle the public's engagement with politics. But using the internet should not be seen just as a handy add-on to a communications strategy: it should be at the core of political life. MPs who fail to embrace the internet's full potential will become invisible, and therefore unelectable.

The scale of the challenge is clear: the public is increasingly disenchanted with conventional mainstream politics. Voter turnout at general elections is down and membership of political parties is at an all-time low. In 1950, 84% of the British population voted. In 2005 it was just 62%.

While the British may be disengaged, they are not apathetic. People are more determined than ever to take control of their own lives, forming groups based on common values and interests to spearhead change.

The voters of today and tomorrow are not interested in being passive consumers: they want to be active participants in civic life. The internet has given younger generations the opportunity to be creators, designers and publishers. People want more than a vote; they want a closer relationship with the state and a chance to get involved in decision making.

This report challenges politicians and political parties to adapt their lives, structures and ways of working to the new information age. There are enormous opportunities for them if they do, but they face oblivion if they do not.

always-on society

The internet is not yet at the core of the political world, but in decades to come it will be.

The generation born after 1990 are digital natives. Technology is hard-wired into their lifestyle. They are always 'on', and they expect all those around them – politicians included – to be also. Of those now at university, says Robert Colvile in the Centre for Policy Studies' 2008 report 'Politics, Policy and the Internet', 97% are internet users. 'This makes an understanding of the online world imperative for politicians, for reasons of basic demography,' he says.

This isn't just a matter of marketing for the younger voters; it's a practical necessity for communication with the whole of society. Recent research by The Future Laboratory for PayPal found that as many as 62% of Britons rely on the internet in their daily lives. uSwitch.com has found that we already spend more time online (34 days a year) than we spend on eating and drinking (21 days), and socialising (22 days).

Instead of being off or on-line, we are increasingly 'inline'. In other words, the boundaries between our real and virtual lives are blurring.

Politics of the future will centre on a growing interest in ground-level issues. As Colvile says, 'most people are not Westminster anoraks: what engages them will be local issues and concrete concerns'. He compares Google search figures to illustrate his point. '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'.

The internet fuels this interest in single issues by connecting like-minded people via online petitions, message boards and social networking sites. As Graham Fisher of Orange R&D points out, 'The most advanced web users do everything as communities and often with a number of different identities.'

collaborative culture

The internet has given people the opportunity to be part of a creative community. With access to digital cameras, camera phones, home-editing software and photo and video sharing sites, anyone can now produce and display creative work, people want to be part of the political world by creating their own content.

Current TV (www.current.com), created by former US vice-president Al Gore and Democratic party politician Joel Hyatt, aims to provide a platform for consumers to air their views by creating or voting on content, or discussing topics on online message boards.

In politics, it was the Deanie Babies, a network of young activists, that first demonstrated the power of this collaborative culture by creating posters and campaign material for Howard Dean's unsuccessful campaign to become the Democratic Party candidate in the 2004 US election.

For the 2008 US election Barack Obama picked up the baton, inviting supporters to become involved in his successful campaign rather than simply contribute financially towards it. Volunteers could, for example, use an online tool to gather names, telephone numbers and scripts to make campaign calls. As Jon Henke, an internet strategist, noted on Politico.com: 'Other candidates' websites immediately ask you for money. Obama's website builds a relationship with a user before asking for money.'

the challenge

Obama's approach, discussed in more detail below, has been vindicated by success, and has dramatically raised the bar for future candidates. The competition for public attention and votes is about to become a lot harder but the way to mobilise a mass movement is simpler for a compelling candidate.

The voters of today and tomorrow are discerning, motivated by a unique set of issues and concerns. They want intelligent argument and intuitive discussion across a range of channels.

As Rushanara Ali, associate director of think tank The Young Foundation, says: 'People are much more mature in their outlook than how they are presented. The more directly they can communicate their own perspectives, the more energised they will be. But at the moment, the public feel like spectators, rather than contributors.'



parliament of the future

Change is slow in Parliament. Formalities of address mean no real names are ever mentioned in the chamber. It took years for politicians to be allowed devices such as Blackberries in the chamber, but even now they are limited to receiving, and not sending, messages.

Technology needs to permeate throughout Westminster. Data must be accessible and searchable online. New innovations in video conferencing will bring more experts into the committee rooms, and the public will be able to join debates in the chamber. E-consultation will become the norm, with politicians, as well as outside experts and the general public joining together in the drafting and discussion.

This is not just about speed and efficiency. A modernised Parliament will be a revitalised Parliament. There will no longer be an information asymmetry between government backbenchers and the primacy of the House of Commons could be restored.

the virtual revolution

'Politics is still designed around communication by horse,' says Richard Allan from Cisco Systems. 'The Parliamentary timetable is based on the notion that people live out in the countryside and then they trot into town for Parliamentary sessions. Everything takes place face-to-face in a very intense atmosphere and then they trot off again.'

This is ridiculous, he says, given that video and audio conferencing technology already exists which can allow politicians to be in two places at once. Face-to-face meetings will always have their place, but technology can also permit new and more efficient ways of working, such as video conferencing, about to experience a revolutionary upgrade to HD (high definition) television. And beyond that, 2D will give way to 3D and HG (holographic) pictures. Prince Charles and Al Gore are already delivering speeches as holograms.

Similarly politicians should be able to connect to virtual walls and touch points around Parliament to download a copy of the latest piece of legislation, or contact a member of the office.

"Technology will increasingly energise parliamentary debate by feeding in information and public comments in real-time via holographic, touch screen and visualisation tools."

Some tasks, such as voting at Westminster, might always be performed in person. As Ed Vaizey MP explains, voting is not necessarily about the vote itself, but spending time together in a closed environment. 'There is no substitute for everyone going through the voting lobbies together,' he says. In a division lobby you can grab a minister, fix an appointment to sort out a complex case and chat to colleagues. 'A virtual Parliament would destroy this.' Similarly, technology cannot replace the intimate, confidential conversations in an MP's surgery.

But the system can be made more efficient, says Andrew Miller, Labour MP for Ellesmere Port and Neston. The current process, he says, ties up six highly-skilled clerks, who have to fill a school-type register and wastes about 200 person hours of MPs time at every division for every vote. 'We could swap that for an electronic system and release thousands of hours of peoples' time,' he says.

Mass lobbies of Parliament will become a thing of the past. MPs will instead hold virtual town-hall meetings on better versions of Second Life, the 3D virtual world created by San Francisco's Linden Lab. On 'Parliament Life', the avatars would be controlled by researchers who will be able to feed the relevant data and listen to constituents' concerns.

Newer parliaments such as in Estonia and Scotland are integrating technology into their operations at a much faster rate. Estonia's parliament, the Riigikogu, for example, has a sophisticated electronic voting system within its parliamentary hall and every MP's room has TV transmission devices and its website offers a full-text search of all parliamentary reports and research. Historic Westminster may not want to follow every innovation, but needs to be aware that the opportunities and possibilities have expanded considerably.

the future of committees

Screens could be set up in select committee rooms to bring experts in from further away. If you need an expert from the World Bank based in Washington, an academic based in Delhi or even an expert Glasgow, then it's simply a case of them dialling in.

Meetings in the future can also be conducted as webinars, says Graham Fisher of Orange. You

will be given a time to log in, and get a live feed of whatever is being discussed, and you get a whiteboard. People can amend things offline and there will be a process of voting on them.

Even by using laptops in committees, experts will be able to give more detailed and informed evidence. Innovative visualisation techniques will also make the presentation of information more engaging and educational. Upstream Engineering, a Finnish research and development company, is set to create an LED micro-projection system that can be added quite cheaply to MP3 players, mobile phones, notebooks or handheld games systems. Data (such as video or textual content) from these devices can then be projected onto a wall.

Andrew Miller MP also thinks it is 'ludicrous' that committee rooms aren't wired up to a local network, so a bill being discussed can be displayed on a screen. If the committee made a change to a clause, they could then instantly see what effect that amendment has. At the moment, he says, 'you still see a clerk, with a pair of scissors and a tube of gum, cutting and sticking, shovelling around bits of paper. It is a crazy system and a ludicrous waste of time.'

The Hansard Society ran a pilot in 2005 for a Home Affairs Select Committee that was holding an enquiry into young people and crime. The pilot tested how young people respond to the opportunities presented by new media. The Committee set up a website so young people could upload videos. As the pilot demonstrated, this increases the possibility for young people to submit evidence and feeds their growing appetite to contribute. But the quality of submissions was an issue, as was fitting young people's language style to Parliamentary traditions and requirements. There still remains a real communications gap between young people and Parliamentary processes.

The Treasury Select Committee has also used technology to develop public engagement and asked the public to email in questions for its evidence sessions.

debates

Technology will enable two revolutions in Parliamentary debate. It will give more information to MPs, dramatically enhancing the power of backbenchers, and allow for better involvement

from the public. All of this could mean better scrutiny and ultimately better government.

involving the public

Moderated public comments, questions and evidence will be fed into the Commons chamber via screens. With opinions and statements being fed in real time, more life will be breathed into those debates which are at present thinly attended. Similarly there could be database of 1,000, 10,000, or even a million voters who instantly could be called upon for their thoughts (through social networks, email, text messages, instant messaging or virtual worlds).

Video technology could also be used to link politicians with debating chambers in schools, says Ali of The Young Foundation. 'I can't emphasise enough the importance of face-to-face contact but if you want to broaden your interaction with the public, and especially with young people, it is important to use these facilities more,' she says.

During Parliamentary questions, MPs and voters will be able to score the quality of ministers' responses in real time. Results could be posted on sites such as TheyWorkForYou.com from MySociety to add to the information that already includes voting records for MPs, how responsive they are, and which topics they talk most about in Parliament.

Potential supplementary questions will also be fed through to MPs by the public, so that they can instantly raise them from the floor. Ministers will also be electronically linked to junior ministers or teams of civil servants so they can provide necessary information to inform their responses.

accessing and presenting information

Politicians will also be able to access the internet no matter where they are, and that includes the House of Commons chambers. Attempts to allow communication technology into Westminster have so far been met with resistance. But not forever. And whereas in the past politicians had to rely on passing paper or craftily typing messages into their Blackberries to get at information they needed, now they will be able to access data instantly. As a result, MPs will be better prepared, and debates better informed, as they are in some other forums.

'I can take my laptop into the Council of Europe and if somebody's talking about an issue you can check the facts as he is speaking,' says Nigel Evans MP.

Innovative visualisation tools will also bring evidence to life and help MPs and ministers present their argument. If an MP is trying to highlight the impact of fly tipping in his constituency, images cast by new projection systems will create a clearer visual impression of the problem in the chamber.

e-consultation and e-legislation

'People tell me they want to help the party develop a policy, but it's difficult because a minister's time is limited. But if people can come in via new technology then it could work,' says Nigel Evans MP.

As Accenture pointed out in its submission to the Hansard Society's 'Parliament for the Future' document, one of the most time-consuming activities that MPs are involved with is the review of new legislation. Bills go through numerous stages between the Commons and the Lords, and this remains a complex process with limited transparency to the public.

Its proposed collaboration applications accelerator toolkit is a technology that could be used to bring MPs together in virtual teams for the drafting process. The introduction of such technology would help make the drafting process available for scrutiny by the public and would increase transparency, possibly as an online 'wiki' format, allowing external edit by experts or the public. In the US, PublicMarkup.org is testing this and is opening bills to online, public review. People can review and comment on proposed bills before they are even introduced – or while they are pending – in Congress. This process needs to start as early as possible, which in the UK means Green and White stage.

The Tell Parliament site already posts online consultations on emotive subjects such as hate crime and human reproductive technologies where the public can read consultation reports as well as raise issues and ask questions. In February 2008 hundreds joined an online forum to share their experiences on domestic violence for a Home Affairs Select Committee.

This could be supplemented by live online discussions, says Clift from E-Democracy.Org. 'As in-person public meetings begin to incorporate live online features, we can envision more deliberate online exchanges to improve the outcomes of the decision-making process.'

Queen's speech of the future

pre-speech participation

True democratic engagement must begin long before the event, with a consultation period starting months before. Independent contributions must be at the heart of the new system, with online forums allowing the public to sign petitions and put forward proposals for their own People's Bills.

People's Bills could be brought into the traditional ceremonial processes. The proposed bills could be symbolically handed to the Queen by the Speaker before the State Opening of Parliament. Douglas Carswell MP has proposed a Citizens' Initiative, permitting members of the public to initiate legislation. Citizens would be able to trigger votes and debates on topics of their choice; ensuring that Westminster reflected the concerns of the ordinary citizen. These proposals would be submitted to the Clerk of the Table office, who would determine the precise wording and be able to rule frivolous, fantastic or repeat proposals out of order. The citizen proposing the Bill would then need to collect signatures. This mirrors the arrangements in other democracies. However, these typically depend on a high signature threshold. Under Carswell's proposals the six most popular would go forward to Parliament at the Queen's Speech.

There should also be up-to-date information online about the progress of bills from previous speeches.

communicating the speech

The speech must be brought into the age of networks. Any Minister sponsoring a bill should webcast to explain the thinking behind each proposal. Champions of People's Bills could also podcast to explain their ideas.

This would be complemented by online polling and discussion forums to allow an instant public reaction to the speech, and also an opportunity for people to make a continuing contribution.

implementation

The web will provide the infrastructure for a truly interactive public discussion. This would include a moderated wiki allowing the public to make comments and suggestions for developing a bill. This wiki would stay open as each bill worked its way through the Parliamentary stages.

There would be an online forum for a broader exchange of ideas, including a facility for people to put themselves forward for citizens' and experts' juries that would advise on the development of each bill. Formal reports from the juries would be sent to the Government and Parliament. These would also be published online.

This would be complemented by online polling, to assess the jury reports but also the changing content of bills. It would be particularly valuable to hold a major online poll of all bills when they reach Second Reading in the House of Commons.

But as Steve Webb MP says, e-consultation relies firstly on bringing large numbers of people into the process, and secondly on ensuring responses are acted upon. 'People will soon get disillusioned if they get no response and nothing changes.'

Technology could also allow more bills to be passed through Parliament. The decision over what goes in or is left out of the Queen's Speech is at the centre of political wrangling as ministers and lobby groups fight for their proposed measures to win a slot in the crowded legislative agenda.

Technology could dissolve this and open up the Parliamentary timetable by publishing certain bills on a secure service online to which MPs could add their thoughts.

sifting out the best

Moderating comments and submissions from the public will require management. One way of achieving this and ensuring the most important or popular gain more exposure, would be to allow the public to rate or comment on the testimony of others, says Clift. 'If I am an MP, I am going to pay attention to the top rated testimony that came in via the net,' he says.

In the French elections, Sarkozy used Digg to sort through questions posed to him by the public through the Debate Sarkozy tool. People could choose which question they most wanted answered, and Sarkozy would work his way through, ensuring the most popular came first.

Technorati, the internet search engine for blogs, searches and sorts information according to its relevance and interest, thereby creating a live view of what's happening on the web.

direct democracy

MPs including Douglas Carswell and Nigel Evans believe technology has a role to play in devolving power to the lowest practicable level, making democracy more direct.

As some observers point out, this will take democracy back to where it began in ancient Athens, where it was possible to run a democracy through the direct daily participation of the whole citizen body. Representative democracy took over because, as the population grew, this became unworkable. In theory, secure, trustworthy technology could allow a return to direct democracy with referenda on every issue.

Opponents argue the danger is that unless the public had detailed experience or knowledge of every subject, their votes would be based on gut reactions rather than informed opinion. It's also unlikely every member of the public has the time or inclination to vote on every bill that passes through Parliament.

A piece-by-piece approach could be feasible, though. Votes on emotive and influential issues such as embryology or detention laws might be opened up to direct votes, leaving MPs to manage the rest.

It is hoped that the proposed Parliamentary e-Petitions system will make the current system more involving by putting responsibility on MPs to guide the e-Petitions through Parliament. Signatories will be informed of progress and ministers will be called on to respond. Most importantly, proposals might be forwarded to select committees for further deliberation or debated within Westminster Hall.

open politics

A crucial first step in making Parliament both more efficient and more transparent will come from making all decision-making information accessible, searchable and understandable online.

At the moment Parliament's website is difficult to navigate. There is a huge amount of information, but the site makes it difficult to find. The use of video is poor and there is no effort to engage the public.

A Parliament Hub, however, would act as an aggregation service bringing together every piece of information into one place.

As Catherine Fieschi points out, the House of Lords already provides transcripts of every debate online. 'It is accessible, legible, it is understandable and actually it completely demystifies the place,' she says.

The key, she says, is searchability. 'If people can get their hands on the information they need, it transforms the relationship they have with politics.'

Full texts from bills, consultation papers, as well as transcripts of debates and committees, reports and communication trails will be openly available and provided in a standardised format. As such it is suddenly open to be read and re-used by bloggers, journalists, businesses, politicians, NGOs and every member of the public.

'Let's explode Parliamentary information and decision-making data into bits via XML and open standards,' says Clift, 'and make it easy to re-use public government data from many sources to create views and searches that provide insight, understanding, and accountability. Think 'Web 2.0' interactivity built on top of government data by those outside of government.'

the open source revolution

The real revolution will not be in the use of technology, it will be the move to open source politics, applying the principles of Wikipedia and Linux. The wisdom of crowds needs to be systematically applied to both legislation and regulation. The principles of the politics of the future must be applied in the government of the future.

the political debate of the future

In a society that increasingly values transparency, personality and mature discussion, the internet provides a space for a new freedom of expression. It's a space where politicians of the future will re-open honest debate and re-connect with the communities they serve. This new space will offer great opportunities, but for political parties the challenge is clear: the old post-war certainties are over. Parties will need to engage in frank debate and connect with single issue campaigns.

public resonance

Politicians in the UK are still in the broadcast mode that was cultivated during the age of television, says Sunder Katwala, general secretary of think-tank The Fabian Society. They use tools such as the internet for one-way communication and to speed up, rather than transform, traditional political structures.

a step in the right direction

The Number 10 e-petition service attempted to allow the public to raise issues of interest but received some criticism for tokenism. A petition on road toll pricing, however, did receive much attention and did influence policy.

Similarly, in 2008, Gordon Brown asked the public to submit questions to his Number 10 YouTube channel. The reaction from some was that it was staged and did not engage with the questions in any depth.

meaningful encounters

This is a shame, says Laura Miller, senior researcher at the Hansard Society's eDemocracy programme, because the internet has so much more to offer. 'The future of online politics looks bleak unless some real progress is made in developing deliberative forms of engagement which ensure that people's voices are heard and responded to in meaningful ways,' she says.

Gone will be the silo-based debate found on most of today's political websites, where activists mix among their own, and bloggers rant to an audience that largely shares their views. Citizens will no longer accept being preached at by politicians. Websites and forums will emerge around particular issues, providing a more formal setting for the kind of intra-party discussion that has emerged on sites such as [politicalbetting.com](#), [USpoliticsonline.com](#) and [arguewitheveryone.com](#).

However, much debate will be outside of dedicated political sites – for example, the 'sciforums' science discussion site has dedicated off-topic sections for world affairs. Similar arrangements tend to be made on history, economics and healthcare discussion forums. Discussion tools such as this will allow a political debate focussed on individual's real concerns.

The internet will create a space where politicians can communicate beyond the converted. Websites and discussion tools will bring together people from all sides of the debate, and from all political persuasions and social backgrounds, to share thoughts and views in one place.

As Sunder Katwala says, communication technology holds great potential for creating a new and more engaged politics. But it only works if tools keep an eye on the true essence of politics; that is, negotiation and compromise, difficult choices, and taking decisions collectively.

constituencies of interest

The internet creates the space for people to focus on the issues that matter to them. It is easier for people to congregate around issues on the internet than it is on the street or in the town hall. Politicians can also tap into the debate and connect with much larger groups than ever before.

But social networking sites currently only have limited appeal for politicians, says Catherine Fieschi, Director of CounterPoint and a Senior Associate of Demos. 'Facebook is used quite clunkily by politicians,' she says. After all, do you really want your local MP requesting to be your 'friend'?

issue networks

Political discourse will be re-energised by networking sites specifically built around issues. 'If you say it is a political site, you are only going to get the Westminster anoraks,' admits Fieschi. But if it is a site built around issues that people care about, such as education, or child poverty, and if the site guarantees wide and engaging discussion, you could bring in swathes of people from different backgrounds and generations who share the interest.

The challenge will be to match constituencies of interest with constituencies of electors. As Richard Allan, of Cisco Systems and an ex-Lib Dem MP, says: 'A constituency is a very tight, geographically bound entity. The internet is not.'

e-Democracy

But, says Steven Clift, founder and board chair of E-Democracy.org in the US, the internet is the ultimate tool for community empowerment and neighbourhood regeneration.

E-Democracy.org hosts online neighbourhood issue forums across the US as well as in Brighton, Bristol, Newham and Oxford in the UK. These online town halls allow citizens with diverse perspectives and backgrounds to gather for discussion, dialogue and deliberation on real public issues.

There are more than 1,000 members of E-Democracy.org's first issue forum in Minneapolis. Over here, 278 people have joined the Brighton & Hove forum to discuss local issues such as planning permission for a new Starbucks and what to do with bikes abandoned in a local bike shed.

At the moment, tools such as this operate at a niche and local level. But if the tools become mainstream, opening debate to the nation while allowing MPs to filter discussions to a local level, the quality and depth of discussions will be transformed.

Douglas Carswell MP

'A lot of politicians still don't understand internet presence and think it is just about having a website,' says Douglas Carswell, Conservative MP for Harwich and Clacton. 'We need to go beyond this by using YouTube and by getting on other third-party sites.'

Carswell set up 'Clacton TV' – a pre-YouTube and pre-Webcameron venture – so constituents could post videos and watch their MP talk about local issues as well as his own interests such as direct democracy and 'freedom beyond the EU'. The site was designed to bypass local newspapers and television stations and replace the more usual leaflets posted to voters.

Carswell now posts videos on YouTube. Generating video material is easy, he says, and the editing software that once costs thousands is less than £100 these days.

Carswell sends out regular emails to constituents that often include links to his campaign videos on YouTube. 'People say they have seen you on TV when it has actually been on YouTube,' he says.

But communication styles and content must be adapted to these new tools, he says. 'These cannot be 1950s-style announcements. And changing the medium often means changing the message.'

local meets national

Clift envisages the possibility of developing a large-scale national democracy portal. This will provide information on officials at all levels of government, from the town parish to the PM. Citizens will be able to write to them and they will have the ability to write back. People from a constituency can come together on this national portal to discuss national and local issues with officials and amongst themselves.

These needs to be supplemented by much more information about the wider views of MPs. Not only do many people not know what their MP's position is on most things, they do not even know what responsibility the MP has. When they vote for their MP, should they take into account foreign policy? Should they take into account street cleaning? Is it a party political vote or is it for an individual?

Nigel Evans, Conservative MP for the Ribble Valley:

'At the moment a lot of political websites are wallpaper. But we've got to look at how to make them far more interactive. For example, I can use the internet to direct people to local councils, and educate them on who is responsible for what, and how they can be given power directly so they don't need to work through a Member of Parliament.'

branded MPs

Iain Dale, blogger and publisher of Total Politics, says he has received a stream of emails from younger readers who have said they have enjoyed the personal and independent style that the blog format provides. 'They do not watch political television programmes, or read national newspapers, but somehow they have come across my blog and it has made them really interested in politics,' he says. 'This is why I am so sad that so few MPs blog.'

One Lib Dem MP told Stephen Ward from the University of Salford, as part of Ward's research into e-democracy, that her blog was a means of humanising politicians. 'She wanted to show people that politicians aren't necessarily a separate strange bunch: they are human beings,' says Ward. 'And she wanted to give a flavour of what life is like as a politician and why they take the decisions they do on a daily basis.'

mypolitician.com

A politician's website today is usually a rather static affair, with a picture of the grinning MP, a rundown of career successes and a list of press releases. But tomorrow's sites and political blogs will be focused on the individual, not the party. As a result, politicians will seem less remote and more engaged with people and their interests.

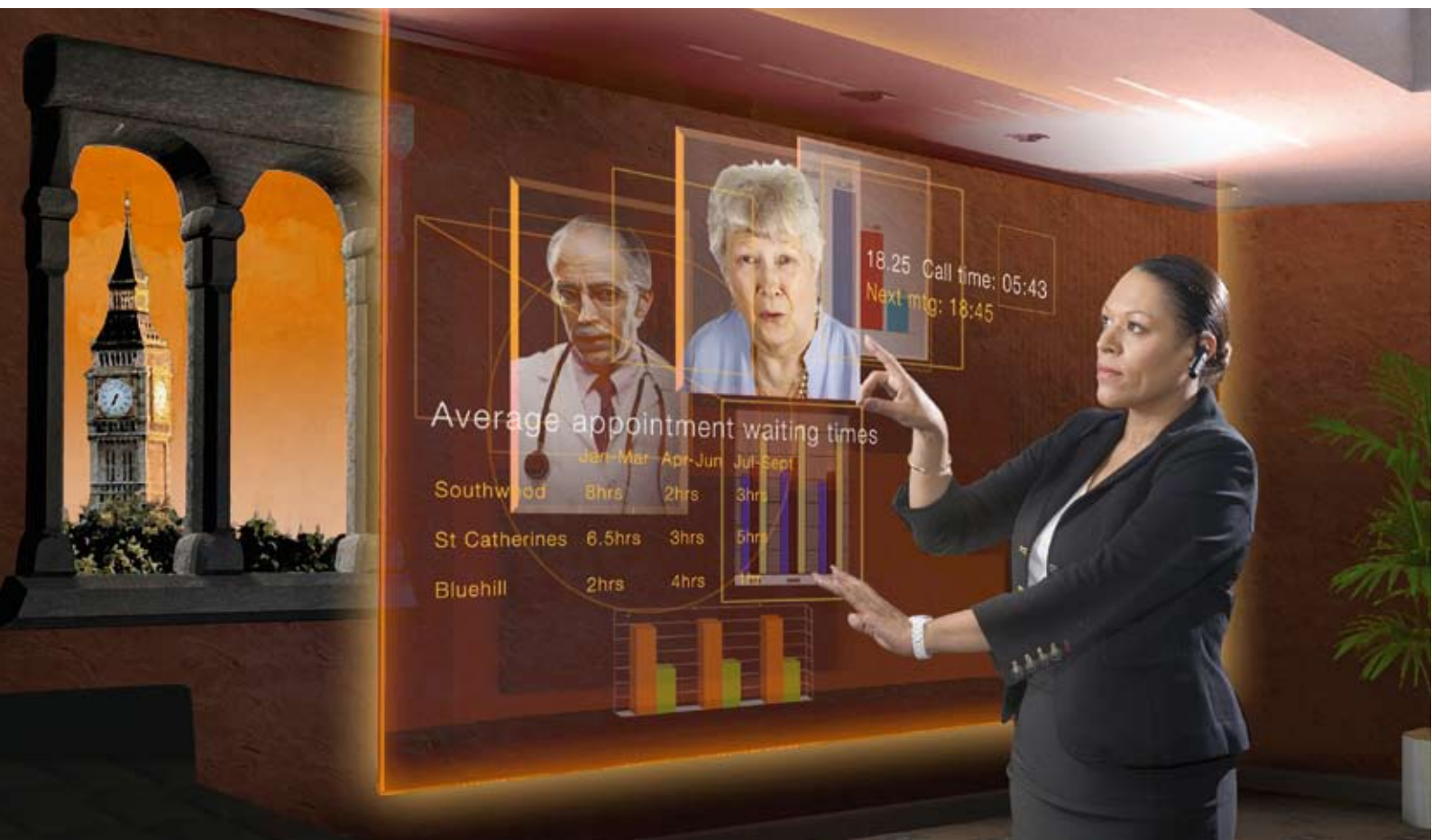
The 18-34-year-olds interviewed by Ipsos Mori and think tank Reform for its 2008 report, 'A New Reality: Government and the iPod Generation', saw no reason why a personal approach to communications should conflict with the audience's serious assessment of policy. For them, assessing the individual responsible for the policy is an integral part of assessing the policy.

handling transparency

Of course, freedom of expression can bring risks. Tom Harris, Labour MP, writes a lively blog with a strong sense of voice and personality.

One off-the-cuff remark, asking why Britain was 'so bloody miserable' in a post about the country's relative wealth and security, got Harris straight onto the front pages and under attack from the opposition. And, perhaps significantly, he was sacked as a transport minister in the October 2008 reshuffle.

What's more, comments posted on a blog during the early stages of a political career can easily come back to haunt a politician as they move up the Parliamentary ladder. However, in tomorrow's world where transparency and personality rule, politicians who risk openness will be valued more. The internet may leave politicians exposed, but not necessarily to harm. In decades to come politicians will be rewarded for direct and candid online communication.



the politician of the future

Despite the potential benefits that communications technology will bring, many MPs still feel overwhelmed by the added noise. Emails add to the workload rather than help make their lives easier. Furthermore, the internet has also transformed the amount of information that is available to politicians, adding to their workloads. MPs need to learn how to use technology to complement traditional forms of contact and enhance their hectic lifestyles.

Technology also presents a more profound opportunity. As more information and more opportunities to communicate become available, politicians will be freed from tight party control and can re-emerge as local figures of consequence and leaders in the public debate, and those who do will be rewarded with electoral success.

staying connected

Technology will not replace face-to-face contact in constituencies, and even in the bars and tearooms of Westminster. As Miller of the Hansard Society points out, constituents still want to ‘press the flesh’. They want to speak to their MPs, seeing them in action and doing things in the local environment.

Rather than being off or on-line, politicians will work between the two. The two worlds will seamlessly integrate. Technology will help politicians organise and publicise real-life events, and help them to form local networks. ‘This is the main role of the internet,’ says Miller, ‘to keep people connected so they know what is happening.’

cross-channel plans

Services are being developed that increasingly make a user’s location and connection methods irrelevant.

Orange is investigating ways to enhance event planning through looking at a tool that will help politicians, lobbyists and activists connect with potential event attendees from across networks of interest-sharing groups. The tool will help organisers contact wider groups of potential attendees. Groups can interact before the event, continue discussions afterwards, share documents and photos, and promote the organisation of future events.

“Digital technologies will allow MPs to act as a community hub, facilitating immediate problem resolution between constituents and public services”

New applications are also appearing that will help streamline technology into the politician's day-to-day life. Fixed phones and mobile phones will soon operate as one, so politicians need only give one number to contacts and receive calls through either device.

New technologies such as IMS (IP Multimedia Subsystem) bring different communication types together into one integrated interface. Although adapted to make them useful on different device types the same information, communication means and applications are usable on mobile phones, PDA or laptop. Additionally new information such as a user's status and location can be made available to selected people. Graham Fisher of Orange R&D says: 'A politician may not be in the same office as their advisors but can still see who is instantly available to answer a pressing question – locating them by what they know and their availability not through the old dumb list of who they know.'

This technology can be used to assist a politician's support staff too. They can see at a glance whether the politician is in that scheduled meeting or can still take a call, whether they are on line or at their laptop for a quick e-mail exchange or, if it's better, to send an SMS for later attention.

Political participation will be promoted too by combining different communication types into one view. A member of the public could view a campaign video, donate to a fighting fund, read related articles, register interest, populate their calendar with dates and reminders, sign a petition and forward links to interested friends all without changing the application or logging in multiple times.

instant insights

Politicians will also learn to use blogging and microblogging tools, like Twitter, to gather information more effectively. As Iain Dale says: 'If I am writing an article and I need to know what the population of Zimbabwe is, I put it on my blog and within 20 seconds I have the answer.'

This kind of communication can also set off more advanced policy development: Douglas Carswell, Conservative MP for Harwich and Clacton, posted a thread on the Tory blog ConservativeHome requesting suggestions for business red tape that could be abolished. As a result of this simple and cost-effective action, he received more than 150 valuable suggestions.

Steve Webb MP

'It appals me, the low expectations many people have of politicians,' says Steve Webb, Lib Dem MP for Northavon. 'If I write back, people are shocked and assume that I would not read the letter.'

Emails have so far been his most effective tool for engaging with constituents. He has already collected 7,000 email addresses, but believes he could eventually collect addresses for three quarters of his constituency.

For the next wave of voters, he expects communication to be carried out through social networking sites. Webb already has 3,500 'friends' on Facebook, with constituents using his page to air their views, and Webb using the site to post photos, link to issue groups and post information and views. But he says there is still plenty of

untapped opportunity in terms of arranging events, and setting up single-issue groups.

To promote traffic on sites such as this, he says, MPs need to appear engaged by responding promptly to comments. 'If they think it is sleeping, and nobody reads it, then why would they bother going back?' he asks.

People also value follow-up, he adds. 'If someone writes to me about an issue and six months later, unbidden, I write them a fresh letter about a development on that issue, they really appreciate it.'

But he doesn't see the internet as a one-off campaign tool. 'This is about relationship building. It is not about politics.'

rethinking the MP's office

Since the arrival of email, MPs have been receiving more and more correspondence. The email hasn't necessarily replaced the letter; but it has added to the volume of correspondence. And taking technology to the next level will require even more time and effort.

'It is great having all the technology,' says Steve Webb, Lib Dem MP for Northavon, 'but if you want to generate dialogue and response, you need a massive structure to deal with it. And if we are going to make it easy for people to get hold of MPs, we have to resource them to respond.'

Ed Vaizey, Conservative MP for Wantage and Didcot, says: 'On the one hand, technology reduces work and massively reduces the costs. But on the other hand I could have five members of staff devoting all their time to managing databases of constituents and emailing them on different issues. So in that sense it can also increase work.'

Nigel Evans MP says he could spend his entire working day dealing with emails from constituents. Finding time to write daily blogs or sift through comments from social networking sites is, for many MPs, an impossibility.

Other forms of technology can help MPs master the large amount of information out in the media. RSS readers are one example. These aggregate feeds from websites according to a user's subjects of interest. Orange is also exploring tools which provide users with a personalised view of the web and keeps them on top of what interests them the most. A politician can design the user interface so they can monitor the key issues that matter to their workload day by day. And widgets, or graphic interfaces, will allow politicians to watch, for example, voting records in an election from their mobile or computer, or track responses to an online petition.

Yet an MP will still sit with a constituent in surgery to talk about a problem. Letters go flying around until that constituent gets a response a few weeks or months later.

Nigel Evans MP asks why he couldn't send a video or sound recording of a meeting with a constituent to the relevant agency so they can gain a more immediate understanding of the problem. 'It would be great for someone from the Child Support Agency to hear a constituent explain the difficulties she is having in gaining the necessary support for her children.' Increasingly advanced video conferencing and data sharing would facilitate this, allowing immediate answers and remote surgeries.

Technology cannot completely supplant all of the person-to-person contact of the surgery, most of which must remain confidential, but it will have a vital role to play.

citizen relationship management

Citizen relationship management will be a case of collecting information about each voter – political bias, family situation, interests and so on – and then targeting communication that will interest them rather than sending out blanket emails or letters to everyone. Of course, such procedures must not fall foul of data protection rules.

Building on this, politicians will need to move out of broadcast mode and start operating a two-way communication with their electorate. They will be able to draw from a wider pool of knowledge, experience and creativity.

'They are not the hierarchical leaders dishing out advice when constituents approach them,' says Stephen Ward from the University of Salford. 'Rather, they are part of a network. They may not even know the answers, but they can direct you to someone who does.'

Politicians will make increasing use of crowd-sourcing techniques to ask crowds of internet users for ideas. One example of crowd sourcing is the Government's Power of Information Task Force's recent competition, 'Show us a better way', which offered a £20,000 prize for the best ideas for new uses of public sector information. As a result of the competition, the Royal Mail will make its postcode address file free for use. Other ideas posted on the site include an online election memory that archives the results and participants in each election.



“Voters of the future will be able to capture the issues they care about ‘live’, allowing them to engage in a ‘trialogue’ between them, the House of Commons debate and a vast network of like-minded citizens via digital devices and services. Citizen-generated-debates will be the norm.”

political campaigns of the future

The 2008 US presidential campaign has already demonstrated the power the internet brings to political campaigning. Now it is the turn for British politicians to pick up the mantle, using technology to raise more money, make campaigns more immediate and interactive and to connect with people over issues.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the internet is that it lowers the barriers to entry into political campaigning. Citizens no longer need to be part of a political party to lend their ideas and organising skills. Everyone is allowed in, and they are valued for every contribution they make.

The challenge of the future will be ensuring that the creativity and energy that the public brings into campaigning can also be carried forward into government.

‘live’ politics

In an always-on society, campaigns are monitored by millions. Armed with handheld devices, citizens can already engage wherever and whenever they wish.

This means nothing goes unnoticed or uncommented on. Every quip and every slip is recorded, scrutinised and republished almost instantaneously and voters can access this in real time. During the 2008 US Super Tuesday, Google teamed up with the online instant messaging service Twitter to create Twitter Map. Posts appeared in real time from each user’s location to reflect thoughts, comments, and current political news.

slicing and snacking on bite-sized chunks

To keep up with this fast-paced media environment, content will be provided in smaller bite-size chunks. Mark Pack, head of innovations for the Liberal Democrats, points out that the average length of the Lib Dems' YouTube videos has become shorter than it used to be.

Media content delivered via notebooks and mobile devices will allow people to maximise their leisure time, a consumption shift dubbed 'slicing'. While this splitting of content is currently only suited to clips, compilations or TV shows, the digital natives of today will increasingly remix old and new content to allow them to snack on the move in the same way we might read a chapter or a few pages of a book as we travel from one destination to another.

Even if they are snacking on bite-size media, voters will still have an appetite for more in-depth and engaged debate. People will sift through a wider array of information and communication, and then drill down to read in more detail about the subjects that interest them the most.

new media, new technology

Communication technology has provided the ability to organise and mobilise large, like-minded groups of people. Through the medium of the internet, millions can now voice support and mobilise action.

In the Philippines it was the 'coup de text' that brought down President Estrada in 2001, when a million people texted each other to demonstrate against the regime.

Third-party endorsements can play a vital role both in building a convincing case but also in generating interest amongst otherwise uninterested voters.

The internet will enable a wide range of supporters to become effective ambassadors for the causes they back. Barack Obama's campaign developed viral emails and video material that supporters could place on their blogs, website and Facebook pages. This material played a vital role in rebutting smears and allegations, and in actually generating support against their origins.

alternative platforms

Well-designed online games can add to this sense of narrative around an issue and attract new types of contributor to a campaign.

One example in the political arena was the web-based multiplayer game, World Without Oil (www.worldwithoutoil.org). The project ran for 32 days in 2007 bringing in 60,000 visitors and 1,800 players from 12 countries. People participated via email, phone, video, blog, and podcast, sharing how they were reacting in real life to a hypothetical scenario of an oil and energy crisis. Players forecasted shifts in fuel prices and availability, they debated how shortages would transform different industries and they devised mitigation strategies. The project allowed actual reactions from the contributors to be used to develop solutions to the problems in the simulation.

Owners of Xbox Live were able to vote through the console in the US election. This collaboration between Microsoft and Rock the Vote aimed to engage a younger political audience.

As well as being fun and engaging, games can return good quality data for policy and campaigns by harnessing the collective intelligence and imagination of citizens, says the Hansard Society in its third 'Digital Dialogues' report on the use of online technologies to enhance engagement between central government and the public.

grass roots campaigning

participation and funding

Barack Obama opted against public financing for his presidential race, leaving him free to raise and spend as much as he wanted in private donations. In September 2008 alone, Obama raised an astonishing \$150m. More than one million signed up to Obama's MyBO social networking application, more than two million joined his Facebook group, 75,000 have organised campaigns, and more than two million citizens have made campaign calls on behalf of his campaign.

Small donations played an unprecedented part in Obama's campaign, accounting for 49% of all money donated, a sum \$100 million higher than McCain raised for his entire campaign. The campaign seamlessly wove together fundraising and participation – the team had credit card swipe machines that could take card and contact details – and send the new supporter a text message or email within minutes.

Political parties have to reverse direction on party funding. They have collected larger sums from fewer people, but contemporary elections, in Canada and the US, have seen spectacular successes for parties able to persuade more people to give smaller sums. We need to develop better systems in the UK through which people can make instant and low-value donations to parties.

David Davis MP profited from this opportunity during his re-election campaign. As Davis told Total Politics in an interview in July 2008: 'It would be a very good thing if we could raise big chunks of money for green issues or individual issues like healthcare where people have really got special interests.'

empowering and enabling

But in the future, the power of the internet will not lie in how many friends a politician has collected on Facebook, or the amount of money raised. The internet can achieve so much more, says Zephyr Teachout, visiting assistant professor at Duke Law School, and former director of online organising for Howard Dean's 2004 campaign. She has urged people to consider instead its democratic possibilities; in other words, its ability to empower citizens to start their own campaigns.

Tomorrow's voters will have come of age in the post-digital era. They are a result of the democratisation of the creative industries where anyone, with the right application and drive, can make it. As a result they will bypass politicians who do not give them the opportunity to get involved in the campaigning process.

Barack Obama's Presidential campaign developed new levels of empowering and enabling, using online material to support ground activity. At MyBarackObama.com supporters could download campaigning materials such as canvassing sheets. However, the Obama campaign allowed a great deal of freedom for activists: supporters were trusted to do their canvassing and then enter their returns onto the online datasheets. The proof of success was the scale of the participative network built – over six million email addresses.

Use of technology and databases also allowed more targeted campaigning. Activists not only went "neighbour-to-neighbour" but could also be specifically targeted at people of a similar background or with similar interests. This online system gave Obama's team live data.

Supporters were engaged in a manner that met their own needs - mobile phones often played a crucial role in this process, being used to keep activists fully updated. Campaign times were also flexible, in what might be called a homeworking approach. Activists could make calls, or go out canvassing at their own convenience.

However, Obama's campaign still involved dissemination of messages from the top-down, with material generated by locally-generated offices being subject to a simple, rapid, review process. Indeed, localisation was an important part of Obama's campaign – having many, smaller offices on the ground.

online campaigns

To join a political party, there is a perception you must agree with the party on everything. But online campaigns allow people to dip in and dip out only on the issues that interest them.

Membership of political parties, says Katwala, is motivated by guilt. You turn up to drop leaflets out of a sense of duty, rather than satisfaction. New forms of online engagement do the opposite: they value every contribution people make and, as a result, gather larger numbers of supporters.

Oxfam has deployed this tactic in gathering supporters for its 'I'm in' campaign to end world poverty. Everyone who texts the campaign is sent an email or a text in response, thanking them for their support and explaining what their contribution meant. 'And all they have done is send a text,' says Katwala.

citizen-to-citizen networks

With barriers to participation removed, and politicians receptive to two-way communication, the scene is set for the public to co-create, run and support political campaigns. The measure of success, should be how many people have been given the knowledge of what it would take to form a local group, and how to use that group to change the structure of their society.

Sites from organisations such as MoveOn.org in the US have been designed to put political power back in the hands of citizens. Tools such as its ActionForum software allow citizens to propose strategies, and its networking features connect and motivate communities of activists.

Tom Watson MP

Tom Watson, Labour MP for West Bromwich, and Cabinet Office minister, believes in the power of mass collaboration.

He was given responsibility for setting up the Power of Information Task Force, which followed from recommendations set out by Tom Steinberg and Ed Mayo, to improve communications practice and engagement with citizens through social media.

At the launch of the Task Force in March, he spoke about his vision to free up government data to engage with and unlock the talent of British entrepreneurs. 'Using the simple tools that bring them together will allow the talents of all our people to be applied to the provision of public services,' he said. This is not trying to bolt a new service onto people, but is about letting them come up with their own online services that benefit their community.

Watson recently came across West Bromwich branch of Freecycle, the local recycling service, which demonstrated how a group had successfully

– and independently – created a simple, free tool that enabled a small social good. 'Recycling one sofa is one thing. Recycling nine million sofas is a big contribution to sustainable communities. The Task Force is going to pick up on this stuff,' he said.

He also set out the goal to use more government information in data mashups, or applications that bring together data from more than one source into a single integrated tool. TheyWorkForYou's use of Hansard, or Google Maps' use of Ordnance Survey, are examples of data mashups already in use.

The Task Force has already got the ball rolling by asking the public to come up with ideas for how government data could be used.

'New tools and ways of working are going to allow us to apply our collective intellectual capital to the seemingly impossible challenges of the modern age,' he said.

As Tom Watson, Labour MP and minister, outlined in a speech at the launch of the Power of Information Task Force in March 2008: 'Any community organiser or activist knows just how hard it is to get people together to do something. Weeks of backbreaking work are required to organise a campaign. Social media allows people to organise a demonstration or a lobby at a single click, with global effect. This is profoundly democratising.'

The Fabian Society's Katwala says the key here is in lowering the barriers to entry to politics. 'These barriers can be high in organisational terms, but they can also be psychologically high,' he says.

It is only a matter of time before the so-called 'net-roots' campaigns generate their own presidential candidate, wrote Matthew d'Ancona in the Guardian in December 2007: 'A serious contender groomed by bloggers and webheads who would run as an independent or, more probably, be grabbed by one of the two mainstream parties.'

Ed Vaizey MP:

'The ability to get campaigns up and running very quickly is massively aided by technology and it will help these campaigns become much more professional. It will also be much easier for voters to galvanise into communities and hold their MPs to account.'

This will present an ongoing challenge to politicians - technology can help the public bypass government altogether. As Jonathan Freedland pointed out in the Guardian in May 2007, it was MoveOn.org that found beds for 30,000 evacuees from Hurricane Katrina by mobilising 10,000 volunteers. And it's Kiva.org that matches rich donors in the West to entrepreneurs in developing countries who need a loan.

the power of the single issue

The public has a huge capacity to support campaigns based on single issues. This has been proven by the 2005 Make Poverty History campaign, and the 2007 road pricing e-petition. Harnessing that capacity will be a case of using technology to lure people in on the issues that interest them.

'People are not going to sign up to everything that a political party does,' says Iain Dale. 'But they might like to get involved in a particular campaign issue.'

Campaign websites will form the hub for interaction. They will be devised around emotive issues such as how to break a country's dependency on oil, says Fieschi. And they will bring experts, the public and politicians to share experiences, knowledge and views.

These interactive sites will offer a variety of media: videos from citizens who have been affected by the rise in oil price, insight from behavioural economists, and forums where environmentalists can come face to face with politicians.

'Third-sector organisations could piggyback on this to create events and give some impetus to the whole thing. There is a potential to build a real narrative around the subject,' says Fieschi.

seeding issues

These new online, single-issue campaign sites need not be driven by political parties or even large NGOs. It took just one man to start a campaign to win rights for Iraqi translators working for the British government.

In the future, single-issue campaigns will be treated as brands in themselves. As Fieschi says: 'Gordon Brown can talk about poverty until he is blue in the face but the nature of his appeal doesn't actually move people enough to mobilise against poverty, whereas they will go for Bob Geldof's Make Poverty History campaign. The reason is that Brown had the issue without the branding.'

Issues, not political parties, will be the more appealing in years to come. Citizens are likely to be more willing to associate with campaigns around child poverty than they might be with a political party. Similarly they may wholeheartedly agree with reducing taxes, even if they do not class themselves as conservative.

the future of the political party

With political campaigns forming around single issues, and politicians favouring freedom of expression over toeing the party line, does the political party have a future?

Research by The Young Foundation suggests it does. 'Although there is a lot of cynicism about political parties, the public still sees them as part of the solution,' says Rushanara Ali, associate director of The Young Foundation.

In the Young Foundation's research for the 2006 report 'Parties for the Public Good', the public ranked political parties above voluntary organisations, campaign groups, business or the media as a means of meeting their long-term needs: 49% believed they help people to have a voice.

As the report points out, much of the blame for declining membership in parties (a generation ago 3.5 million Britons were members of political parties, today the figure is nearer 500,000) lies with the parties themselves.

First the Conservatives under Mrs Thatcher, and then Labour, organised their parties into tightly centralised machines focused on mass advertising and large donations from a small number of sources. 'But this left them hollowed out as parties,' says the report, 'less able to recruit new members, less able to relate to the public and less able to renew themselves internally.'

civic responsibility

The priority now is to remake the parties as civic institutions and link them to activities that contribute to democracy, such as developing future leaders, policy and research, and work in improving local areas.

Technology will play an important role in this, says Ali of The Young Foundation. People get frustrated, she says: they express their opinions, but they see no evidence of any action happening as a result. To redress this, parties could use the opportunity to notify citizens about tools such as FixMyStreet from MySociety that allow citizens to report on issues such as rubbish or graffiti in their local area.

As Ali says, it is a case of using technology to make things happen and to link party politics with local issues. 'Technology should help political parties broaden out connections and information sharing,' she says.

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