

Rethinking democracy and development: what role for media and technology? (FPC panel at Lib Dem conference)

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2011-9-18

These are my speech notes from a [Foreign Policy Centre fringe meeting](#) at the Liberal Democrat Conference.

Media doesn't cause revolutions or generate political will or produce democracy or foster development: all those things happen because of social trends, economic circumstances and political and policy decisions by citizens, companies, governments and politicians.

But if I were looking for a key policy and implementation variable or a new, powerful resource then I would certainly turn to new media technology. It's 'just a tool' but in terms of instruments for change, this is definitely at the Dr Who sonic screwdriver end of the DIY development range.

We see all around us how people and organisations use new media technologies in a vastly, exponentially expanding way. No-one is forced to do so. They are successful because they are cheap, easy, scalable, adaptable, extraordinarily effective and enjoyable.

The numbers are now right. The world is young and using these technologies.

So let's go for it?

I am an enthusiast but when we think in policy terms or politics – we need to be cyber realists and avoid buying into myths.

In the next five minutes I want to make these simple points:

1. Digital media is not a neutral technology – networked politics is different
2. Transparency is not just about data – it's about accountability
3. Delivery takes skills, investment and strategy – who's going to provide?

1. Digital media is not a neutral technology – networked politics is different

A lot of people refer to the new media technologies in a very instrumentalist way as if the platforms or devices are neutral. They do amazing things, people say, but they are 'just tools'. I am not so sure. I think one of the aspects we need to think through much more is how networked, interactive, participatory communications are different in the way they change – or can change – the relationship between citizen, power and organisations like political parties, governments or companies.

Can you name a single leader from the Tunisian revolt? No. The evidence we see is that these new technologies create a much more diffuse, leaderless form of activism and expression – much more personal, viral and distributed. It is much less hierarchical and relies of peer affirmation and validation rather than official or organised structures. This kind of communication is much more adaptable to local circumstances, much more flexible, much harder to control. We love it when it happens in Tunisia but it's more threatening when people use it during arson attacks and looting in England. I suspect that these technologies are most effective as ways of catalysing change rather than administering power but they do seem to energise politics in a much more inclusive and innovative but also unstable way. You only have to think – like I have for my new book – about WikiLeaks to see that this

communications is about an age of Uncertainty and Complexity – and I think that might be good.

2. Transparency is not just about data – it's about accountability

I remember an MP a few years ago telling me he didn't want to have a public email because then his constituents would 'all want to contact him'. He was right of course, as our report by Stella Creasy shows, new media can raise unrealistic expectations of the democratic process – do you really want push-button referenda on everything? It's perfectly possible technologically, but probably not politically desirable, unless you want an 'X Factor' government.

But it works the other way, too. Just having a website or even a Twitter account does not mean you are listening. What results, in terms of information, services or influence, will this kind of openness deliver for citizens? There's no point having online petitions if they just result in a talking shop.

3. Delivery takes skills, investment and strategy – who's going to provide?

I am less concerned about traditional digital divides – generally speaking technology adaption happens and it's a technical issue – what I think is more important are the barriers to effectiveness, not to access.

So as we move across the world into an era of information abundance instead of scarcity we will need translators, interpreters, filters and editors to help create a genuinely informed society. People need education for those skills – but citizens can't do it all – there is still a role for traditional skills such as journalists – we should not ignore the role of mainstream media as it becomes more networked.

We also need other civil society organizations, from councils, to private companies to universities to become much more open (LSE 3.5 million podcast downloads in July alone) but also to provide accessible information and to help analyse and edit other information flows. We are all journalists now, but let's be good and useful journalists.

Finally, information is not the same as action. Online activity is only valuable when it goes offline and has real world results.

In development policy terms this means:

- Supporting the infrastructure of networked journalism
- Fostering policies that create Digital Citizenship
- Promoting valuable flows of international information, such as the BBC World Service
- Protecting the infrastructure of an Open Internet from authoritarian or corporate restrictions
- Supporting social media enterprise as a goal of development policy from NGOs and government aid.
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