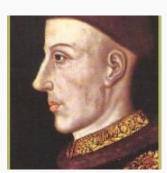# Henry V & The Internet

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/06/18/henry-v-the-internet/

15th Century Geek

I work in a modern tower block office in an alley where an Internet was invented in the 15th century.

Let me explain.

After about 1422 Henry V started writing his letters in English instead of Latin. These were the documents that allowed him to exercise power. They were the business email of the time. Their purpose was to make and carry out the laws of the land. But they were often also made public as a way of letting everyone know what was going on. They told the English people about everything from battles to taxes. So they were also the journalism of the age.

Through a complex system of legal training schools (Inns of Court) Henry's regime fashioned a whole bureaucratic system of using letters – written in English – to create both an administration system, and through publication, a whole medieval public sphere.

15th Century Silicon Alley?

My office is in the remnant of one of those Inns, called St Clements overlooking London's legal Gothic masterpiece of the 19th century, The High Courts. What Henry V did to communications is uncannily similar to what is happening to the Internet and politics and government now.

This is how medieval historian Gerald Harriss explains it in his wonderful book Shaping The Nation:

> "Letter-writing, habitual in personal and business matters, also developed a political dimension. Kings sent news bills describing their campaigns in Ireland or France; Londoners wrote accounts of particular events of national interest – a parliament, a battle, a political ritual, or a coup – for the benefit of a provincial audience , letters were issued as public manifestos by noble malcontents or plebeian revels; well-reasoned letters upheld Lollard beliefs against ecclesiastical persecution."

But what is interesting is how that functional literature for the elite blossomed into mass multi-media:

> "Such public and semi-public letters were passed round, read out, nailed on doors, retained in private collections, or copied into private journals and officials registers. Ubiquitous literacy drew political society together in a web of information, rumour, warning, and advice. 'The intimacy of the governing class, its limited size, its interconnectedness, and its openness made the circulation of information within it easy' – nourishing a political mentality."

I think the key phrase there is "Ubiquitous Literacy". The Internet can do this, too. The simple fact of making data

available changes its political significance.

Just putting information into a language that people understand and so have access to, doubly changes its political significance. It's what we call data visualisation.

But here's the important bit, for a journalist. Letters put that information, written in a widely comprehensible language, into a narrative. Or rather a whole series of plural narratives. This is crucial. As Harriss explains, the 15th century was a multi-platform, multi-source media environment: "passed round, read out, nailed on doors, retained in private collections, or copied into private journals and officials registers". Those clerks were creators and curators of the information, a medieval precursor of networked journalists.

Instead of an iPad they had quills and vellum. When paper came that was a bit like moving on to SuperFast broadband.

They did not need a Digital Economy Bill. Although they did need a legal framework and they invested in a system of media literacy that sustained this flow of executive data production – the Inns of Court, the clerks of the Palace of Westminster and so on. This is also when Whitehall starts, I am afraid.

Anyway, make of it what you will. But I am pleased that the public sphere predates Habermas' 17th century coffee shops. It shows how this kind of political discourse can be adventurous at first, revolutionary in its effects, but very much subject to the inertia of power's gravitational pull. It is up to us as journalists to resist that, of course. In the words of Henry V. "once more unto the breach!"