

# Recasting Power: revolution still pending

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If the politicians like social media so much, then we must be doing something wrong. That's my half-serious conclusion after the latest [Polis/Channel 4 debate on the future of the Internet](#).

The forum was held in a building that used to be a nail factory in Birmingham and our presenters quickly got to the point (or down to brass tacks – you choose the pun). Mike Rawley and Tony Walley from the excellent Stoke citizen journalism news website [Pits'n'Pots](#) showed how 'former journalists' can take on a dodgy local council and political extremists *with* the public. They produce stories and debate in a way that makes mainstream local political media look tame and narrow.



Nick Booth has been doing a range of good work with others in Birmingham on sites including the ambitious citizen investigative journalism site [www.helpmeininvestigate.com](http://www.helpmeininvestigate.com). Veteran campaigner Audrey Miller showed how she has used the Internet to broaden her activism on global debt to include neighbours as well as people around the world.

It is all relatively small scale and the projects are still pretty fragile but then that is the nature of new social media, especially in a more local context. These social enterprises were all politically passionate (without being partisan) and had practical outputs. The audience of social media enthusiasts loved them. And so did our panel of three politicians. That's what worried me.

## Plaudits and Brickbats

Birmingham councillor Paul Tilsley got plaudits and brickbats in response to his attempt to justify the expense of their sparkling new council website. He is certainly now much more aware of the power of the net to provoke protest than he was a few years ago. Like a good Liberal Democrat he responds quickly to complaints on the street that appear on the web.

Likewise, Emily Benn, who is battling nigh-impossible odds to become a Labour MP in east Worthing at the next election, showed how any self-respecting young politician (and she's only in her second year at University) combines Facebook with doorstep leafletting.

And online campaigning is what Charlie Elphicke hopes will propel him to power for the Tories in Dover where he uses Twitter, blogs, websites and every other digital device to connect with constituents. He also believes that he can use the same platforms if – or rather when – the Conservatives get into government. He thinks that it is, at least, the beginning of a revolution in political communications.

## Rude and Irregular

All the politicians accepted that independent social media is now part of the political communications landscape. They realise it will be rude, irregular and unpredictable. They even agreed that they should make sure that they and their parties, councils and government should be open to what social media can do for their electors. Although everyone also recognised that by its very nature, it must spring from voluntary, community action.

But I didn't get the sense that they thought it would really change anything. The ballot box and party politics are safe. The system sees social media as a tool for making the machine work more smoothly, not for a change of gear, let alone direction. The politicians were pretty comfortable with it all.

## Marginal Media

And I suspect that is because for all its enterprise, political social media is too marginal compared to, say, traditional

mainstream news media, to have enough of an impact. Certainly this election will not be an Internet election. There may be the odd awkward moment for the politicians captured on citizen camera. Blogs will come up with a few stories that no-one else has the guts or inside information to pursue. But there is not the critical mass behind social political media either locally or nationally for it to make much of a real-world difference – yet.

I suspect that its real value will be in its 'Networked Journalism' effect. This is what the men who run Pits'n'Pots described so eloquently when they listed the number of mainstream media and political organisations that come to their grass-roots website looking for stories and information. It is not the direct power of political social media that will have most impact. It is their indirect, networked role as a catalyst that could create the most democratic heat.

Thanks to everyone who came to Austin Court, the video of the evening will be [here](#) in a few days time.

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