

New thinking on Digital Britain: Recasting The Net, Round One

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Matthew, Helen and Tom

There is new thinking out there on the role of the Internet, but there is no consensus. That was what I took away from an exhausting but inspiring evening of [debate at Channel 4](#)

As @amandeepr said, “The discussion was a bit too disparate with too many agendas. A bit like the Internet” but I feel that anyone who has a glib or universal answer hasn’t been asking the right questions.

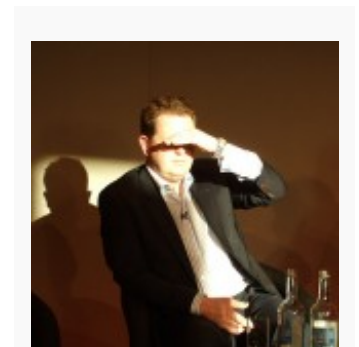
I was chairing the first of the Polis/4iP [Recasting The Net debate series](#) on the public service role of the Internet so I was unable to take notes. Luckily, a lot of bloggers and Twitterers were doing that for me, so here are my thoughts recollected in tranquility and via the online note-takers. (Twitter Hashtag #Recasting)

Our (over ambitious) question for this opening debate was Where’s The Revolution? Has the Internet lived up to the hype with its effects in the real world?

1. A new political framework?

I detected some interesting lines of connection and difference emerging from our panel where Spectator Editor Matthew D’Anocona, UK Online’s Helen Milner and 4iP’s Tom Loosemore all shared an enthusiasm for the transformative powers of the Internet. But their political understanding of what it does and what it needs were significantly different, but which I would sum up in a crude and oversimplistic way as Burkean versus Welfarism.

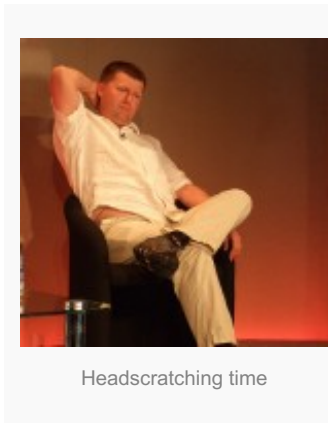
Matthew D’Anocona loves the internet because it “maddens elites. Political parties cant control it therefore they despise it.” It has revitalised that ancient media institution The Spectator under his editorship and he believes it can do the same for politics. However, what emerges may not be revolutionary, though it sounded distinctly liberal.



Not a Spectator

Helen Milner believes that access to the Internet and the skills to use it are a basic right and that empowerment is about producing cooperation rather than competition.

These aren’t mutually exclusive positions but they adopt a certain ideological approach. Tom Loosemore attempted to suggest that the Internet itself has an ideology where the ‘hive mind’ works best and where successful enterprises will observe the ‘nature’ of the net: open, sharing, collaborative. He asked us to think about “What can the Internet’s affordances teach us about building on this network to do what society wants us to do?”



2. Technological determinism

On a straw poll a big majority of the audience believed that 'the Internet is innately democratic' but OpenDemocracy's Tony Curzon-Price was right to rail against some softish thinking on the inevitability of its effects. 'Technological determinism' is something we would all deny subscribing to, and yet it does still plague the debate.

As @joannejacobs pointed out, the "characteristics that created the network won't necessarily produce the same social engagement with the tech".

3. Economics versus social enterprise

Andrew Keen tried to introduce the ugly realities of economics to the debate but there was a reluctance to deal with huge monopolistic elephants in the room, such as Google.

"There may be 20 thousand engineers at Google, but there are 20 million on the internet" said Tom Loosemore

@paulbradshaw: is trying to bring together social media techniques to find new business models for journalism: "For me, old economics still rule – but they're in a battle with the new economics and currencies of social capital"

4. The Revolution is so last decade

Generally, there was a lot of optimism but no desire to repeat the dot.com boom hype. People were quoting Shirky and Leadbeater but as references rather than rhetoric.

As @brianhoadley put it: "Why are we so fixated on 'the revolution'. Is it not a rapidly evolving set of experiences and technologies?"

And, of course, no high-minded discourse around the profounder aspects of the Internet would be complete without the wisdom and wit of Bill Thompson @billt: "What do we want? Meaningful disaggregation! When do we want it ..."

As Tom Loosemore said, the Internet is "distributed, minimalist, messy, inherently collaborative, adaptable". Much like Recasting The Net.

Thanks to all who took part at the event and online and I look forward to you joining in with the [next events](#) around the country in the autumn.

For an excellent critical commentary on the event I would suggest Joanne Jacob's article [here](#)

All photos are from Bill Thompson: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/recastingthenet/>

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