

Recasting The Net: A Polis and Channel 4/4iP National Debate

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Polis is partnering up with Channel 4/4iP on a series of national debates to be filmed for a special website on the state of the Internet and the future of online media. Do you want to join in? Here's the thinking behind this attempt to reboot the conversation on what we want from a digital Britain.

Is the Internet advancing faster than society can evolve? Is the rapid pace of media change even outpacing the human brain? There have been a stack of stories recently suggesting that our synapses and even our civilisation can't cope with the endless and accelerating, exponential explosion of digital communications.

This is one of the central themes for a new national series of debates that Polis is curating from June in partnership with Channel 4 and 4iP. We feel that the debates about Old versus New Media are over. But there are still plenty of arguments to be had about whether the Internet makes any real difference to how we live our lives. And if it does, what are the potential hazards or benefits?

We have heard a lot from Internet enthusiasts – [myself included](#) – about how everything from democracy to art is going to be cheaper, easier and much more exciting thanks to digital technologies.

Of course, there is another perspective that says that the Internet revolution just hasn't happened. The only thing online making money – apart from celebrity and sex – is search (Google) or retail (Amazon). Online politics has descended into the farce of the Downing Street e-petitions and scurrilous blog plotting. Mainstream journalism is dying on its feet while the digital alternative remains still-born – or so say the Internet sceptics.

This is not just about being either optimistic or pessimistic. It is about what we can do online. What is the public value of activity on the Internet? Is web-based creativity and connectivity any different from what happens offline? Do digital platforms simply expand our communications or do they transform our relationships?

Where's The Revolution?

Our first event in London on June 1st will set the social and historical context for the series. The Internet now has a history which we can use to frame a critical approach to current activity and to set out scenarios for the future. We will explore the social potential of the Net, not just the technological or commercial opportunities. This debate has previously been dominated by corporations – so how can we inform the current policy agenda with some fresh thinking about public service online?

People and Power: control or conversation?



The acid test will be the impact the Internet has on the possession and exercise of power. Our second event in the autumn in Birmingham will look at the implications of digital media on politics in the widest sense. Is it enough for politicians to use new digital tools to carry out their existing work? Surely online political communications should be about a conversation not control? People can use the Net to participate in the political process in new ways, but what are the implications of all of these voices making themselves heard? How can the Internet promote transparency, accountability and trust in itself and in political discourse? In the end, does the Internet tend towards extremism or a plural political discourse?

Rethinking knowledge: how is online changing culture?

In our third event in Sheffield we will debate how arts and education organisations should respond to the digital challenge. The Internet means we are re-thinking knowledge itself, but in reality how is online changing culture? How can we encourage the discoverability of new cultural content? Do institutions like the British Museum, your local library or a school still matter? In a cut and paste world are we losing the ability to concentrate on complicated real life problems?

Individuals and communities: social action or exclusion?

What is the right strategy for the individual and the Internet? We are all on Facebook or CCTV. So how can we use the Internet for social action rather than exclusion? In our fourth debate in Glasgow we will ask how do we give people the power and protection without losing the freedom and independence offered online? How can people use the Internet to change our communities and our sense of citizenship? How will our privacy change and our sense of identity? What will an Internet City look like? What is friendship and family like online?

Designs and Visions: Thinking the Impossible

In our final debate in London we will be looking to the 'next' future. What are the designs and visions for the Internet tomorrow? Is this just a case of the latest version of Microsoft or can we dream the impossible digital dream? While most of us are just starting to grapple with Facebook and Twitter, the geeks are developing new toys with abilities beyond our wildest imaginations. Will the Internet and its effects continue to evolve exponentially or will the new technologies become adopted and subsumed? And beyond Digital Britain how is the rest of the world innovating with new technologies and connecting itself to the Web?

We want this series to be highly participative, inviting contributions from a wide range of Internet experts, practitioners, strategists, and bright new talents in the field. The live events around the country will be filmed and featured online alongside interviews with other key thinkers and doers. The aim is to create a continuing dialogue between the media and UK citizens about what Digital Britain should look like.

Contact Us – Join In

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For more info, or if you would like to attend one of If you want to know more about these events contact us at polis@lse.ac.uk or recasting@channel4.co.uk

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