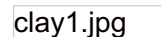



Clay Shirky: online group action lacks legitimacy

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/02/04/clay-shirky-group-action-needs-legitimacy/

2009-2-4

 For [Clay Shirky](#) to question the legitimacy of online group action is a bit like seeing Jamie Oliver tucking into a half-pounder with extra fries in MacDonalds. It makes you think.

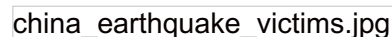
[Speaking at the LSE](#) it was clear that the Internet enthusiast and author of [Here Comes Everybody](#) is having second thoughts. We all should.

 Clay and I agreed that the argument about whether the Internet is a 'good' thing is over. It is clear that, on balance, the communications power of email, blogs, online video, crowd-sourcing, social networking and the rest is a force for more efficient and creative living and working. Obama's triumph suggested it could be a force for progressive change in politics, too.

Clay's ethos has always been that society can be transformed into a more democratic place if we apply the collaborative and innovative potential of the Internet to governance. Let the people participate through online platforms, forums and networks, and greater democracy will follow.

But as I warned in my book [SuperMedia](#), there is nothing innately democratic about the Internet. It has to be understood primarily as a medium, albeit one that I think has transformational powers.

Clay's talk outlined those powers which he believes are growing. He told how the Internet prevented the Chinese authorities from implementing their usual control of information during the [Sechuan Earthquake](#) because once the news broke online it was impossible to silence. This led to the public protest against corrupt officials who had built substandard housing.





President Obama set up [change.gov](#) as part of his attempt to keep the public participation going from his extraordinary interactive grass-roots election campaign. But as Clay pointed out, what did the public vote for when asked for the most important priority facing the administration? The economy? environment? Iraq? No, a group of anti-drug law campaigners managed to force the legalisation of marijuana to the top of the list.

Shirky thinks this is now the biggest issue facing online public activism: legitimacy. It is simply too easy to campaign or lobby online. There needs to be ways of creating or measuring the legitimacy of online political actions that go beyond how many people click on a website.

But how do you distinguish between the campaign by [Mysociety](#) against MPs who tried to cover up their expense claims, with a bunch of potheads trying to get their spliff decriminalised? In Clay's words, we "need to find an algorithm that works".

Picture credit to [Canyon](#) who also blogged about this event.

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