

Politics and new media – emotions and brains (Participatory media conference Part 1)

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/03/28/media-republica-conference-participatory-media-all-in-the-brain/

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It's a sunny day (again) in LA but in the windowless bowels of the [Annenberg](#) institute at the University of California, minds are focussed on the social effects of the Internet. New media academic legend [Manuel Castells](#) kicks off with the word that lurk behind all these discussions:



Power:

Power is always a relationship. That is how democracy comes about. Crisis of political legitimacy comes from the disjuncture between what is practiced and what is in people's minds.

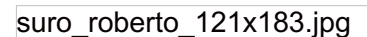
He talks about how political communications is actually about playing on deep physically-rooted emotions:

Gut feelings are real: they are actually located in the brain not the stomach: there is a fundamental role for emotions – people reject information that doesn't fit in to their basic feelings. So metaphors are rooted in the brain especially in deep emotional feelings such as fear – hence the metaphor of the War On Terror...that is why Media are critical because they are the connector between our brains and our environment. Politics is fundamentally media politics. They are the field of power relationships.

And new media allows us as citizens the tools to change those relationships through new media:

"They watched us throughout history – now we watch them."

After Castell's conceptual essay the veteran journalist [Roberto Suro](#), who also teaches at the University of Southern California, attempted to bolt down some



ideas such as the goal of this conference: 'participation'. He stressed that 'participation' is about outcomes. I liked particularly his exposition of how journalism with all its faults of competition and bias was a good model for creating political networks and helping form civic society.

But, "Formulations of journalism's role in a democracy are subject to change". The last big change was in the middle of the 20th century. And we are now going through a period of severe re-definition. Everything is on the table, the challenge is to unpack the forces that are making these changes."

Like me he believes that as the new media revolution matures we are finding that mainstream and citizen media are increasingly mixing and working together. Suro stresses that doesn't mean that there aren't till new ethical dilemmas. What happens to ideas of objectivity for example? He points out how partisan journalism tends to happen at the extremes, leading him to ask whether participatory media can actually push discourse to the fringes rather than deepening debate.

Philosopher, blogger and Berkman fellow [David Weinberger](#) then had the task of defining what is different about the web in all this. He contrasted some classic definitions of the web with the current realities.

The Internet is an ecosystem he says. But ecosystems can be brutal places. The web is pro-am. But there is still a vast gulf between the two. The web is information flow. But we don't all consume news just for information. The web is about abundance. But that can mean a lack of control: an abundance of the bad swamping the good.

davidweinberger.jpg

We used to have systems for controlling all this. In news, he says, they were called editors. In an abundance of good the struggle is over metadata. So we need new tools. This can be something as simple as tagging or as complex as the semantic web. It can be social networks. But these tools or processes are unsettling, they are transparent, they are fallible, says David. This is exciting but it is not easy.

David's own blog about this conference is [here](#).

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