Battle of the big beasts

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Four of Britain's best political commentators clashed tonight at an evening ostensibly to mark the shortlist for the Reuters sponsored George Orwell Prize for political writing. It turned in to a rather bitter argument between Steve Richards (The Independent) and Peter Oborne (The Mail) over whether politicians or journalists are to blame for a perceived lack of honesty in politics. Along with Michael Cockerell (BBC) and Bruce Anderson (The Independent) they lamented the passing of an age when politicians and journalists knew their respective places and spin was something that tops did. There were brilliantly rude exchanges which generated wonderful heat on a cold Docklands night. But why were these big beasts of the commentariat jungle fighting each other when they should be worried about their own extinction?

Paul Mason (Newsnight) in the audience asked a good question about how the media could engage younger people in politics but this was largely ignored as was any reference to New Media. I am sure that Orwell would not have made the same mistake. I reckon that if he were alive today he would be blogging and networking online. The reason that political commentary is the only game in newspapers is because factual reporting is all now done on 24 hour TV news and online. But even the comment function could disappear as blogs and social networking sites take over the job of analysis, opinion-mongering and debate. I hope that people like our quarrelsome quartet will be found roaming the new media landscape because we need their insight and experience. But we also need them to stop talking to each other and start listening and communicating with the wider world out there. The public hasn't given up on politics or even political journalism. It is simply that they are doing it for themselves. It is time for journalists to join in the big conversation.