

CYBERSPACE: THE CONTINUATION OF POLITICAL EDUCATION BY OTHER MEANS

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Introduction

Once again a communication technology is being proclaimed the means to achieve fundamental social change. This time it is the World Wide Web on, and the interactive potential of, the Internet. In a very short space of time, it has become a newsworthy and richly mythologised technological system. Twelve to eighteen months ago, beyond academic researchers and developers in the computer industry, only enthusiastic computer hobbyists would have heard of or used it. Now, Ministries and departments of national governments, mainstream political parties, and somewhat more tentatively business and commercial organisations are posting “home pages” on the Web. News media regularly feature its development, often including reference to their own “home pages.” There is even a clutch of specialist magazines (*Wired*, *Internet Today*, *NetUser*, *Internet*), none of which is older than about fourteen to fifteen months.

How do political parties view Internet, and how is it being used by them, Ministries and departments of government, and journalists? What might be the consequences of their explorations of this medium? The Internet and other lanes of the “information superhighway” will, it seems, radically change political practices and relations, and facilitate more open, participatory forms of governance. Seemingly, this intrinsically democratic technical system will challenge the institutionalised hierarchies of established political systems. For the British Labour Party, the Internet “could bring fundamental enhancement to the democratic processes itself”¹ and could widen participation in “the processes of reason-

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ning and discussion and reflection inherent in representative democracy." Whatever the Labour Party might mean by this, it is something more than employing interactive information and communication technologies (ICTs) for "instant electronic plebiscites," soundings of public opinion on major policy matters, or of consumers to gauge their satisfaction with services.

While still early days, a discernible pattern of use seems to be emerging in the UK. I have been unable to locate the development of policy oriented, interactive networks² in the UK by either central or local government agencies. They have instead concentrated on providing information services. Local authority Web sites, largely represent information about their services and the areas they serve. Most of the files placed on the Internet by UK Government departments and by local authorities do not encourage participation beyond inviting readers to comment on the appearance of the files themselves. The developing pattern of use suggests that, while established political practices and relations might be disturbed, there are already signs that normal service in the predictable future will be much as it has been in the past.

Broadcasting and Citizenship

Use of the Internet by established political actors is conditioned in part by their views on and use of other, more established media of communication. The paper therefore compares and contrasts views on television journalism and politics in the 1960s with those on the Internet and politics at the present time.

In July of 1965 a seminar³ on Television and Citizenship was held under the auspices of Political and Economic Planning to consider what contributions the "mass" media, and television in particular, might make to nurturing citizenship. The specific focus was whether the mass media had "a substantial influence on civic thinking and action and whether television, so often criticised as an incitement to violence and intellectual degradation, was not in fact already, or at least potentially, a powerful force for civic education" (Blumler 1965, 5).

Blumler's report of the seminar noted concerns about participation in civic affairs, and proposed that, as the responsibilities of national and local government had "steadily expanded to embrace virtually the whole of society, it has become increasingly desirable that the information and the choices on which important civic judgments depend should be communicated effectively to all citizens" (Blumler 1965, 10). On the face of it television provided ample opportunities.

By 1965, parliamentary affairs were being extensively covered by news and current affairs programmes, from the in-depth inquiries mounted by the BBC's *Panorama* to the briefer and lighter coverage afforded by its news magazine *Tonight*. The 1964 General Election was not the first in which television had been involved, but the extent of its involvement had grown considerably to something like the proportions of present day coverage, and the forms were much as they have been for more recent General Elections. Electioneering had become something more of a televisual, rather than a merely political, event. The phrase "television election" had already been coined by press journalists in the course of the 1959 General Election, and by 1964 it seemed even more plausible that elections had become a "virtual," televisual reality. In the course of planning for the 1964 General Election, Grace Wyndham-Goldie (1977, 265), then Head of Talks Group, Television, observed that

