

Does unregulated political content online helps the democratic process?

By Hannah Marshall

As the 2010 election looms, there is much discussion over how it will be affected by the rise of new media. Will this be the first new media election? Will it be better or worse for democracy if it is? How will blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube will affect the campaign itself and the democratic process generally? Undoubtedly new media has mushroomed since the last election, so the medium will be different, but will the message?

In the UK, political commentators and experts are, by turns, optimistic about the opportunities the internet provides for communication in a democratic society, and worried about the potential risks associated with anonymity and bias on the wild world web.

‘Anything that gives people chance to engage in the democratic process has to be a good thing.’ says prominent Conservative blogger Iain Dale. For him, new media is ‘an incredible development which means ordinary people get a say in things. If you want to contact your MP, you just send them a tweet or an email, and you expect a response within 24 hours. Ten years ago, Mrs Tinsley in Scunthorpe might have had a letter published in her local newspaper, maybe once a year. Now, she can start her own blog and publish her views to whoever may choose to read it.’

But that, according to David Kett, who taught public affairs to several generations of aspiring journalists, is precisely the problem with the digital age. ‘Anyone can be a journalist now, and that concerns me, it can lead to some very unfair reporting,’ he worries. He believes online media should be regulated in a similar way to the broadcast media. But it’s hard to see how this would be implemented.

‘Government regulation is not necessary,’ counters Iain Dale, ‘it wouldn’t work’. A view shared by David Cole, a contributor to the left-wing blog, Liberal Conspiracy, who feels online journalism should only be regulated when it comes from established sources such as the BBC. ‘I don’t think it’s possible to do it for blogs etc, or YouTube; in many cases they’re hosted outside the UK and it’s hard to stop a video once it’s gone viral.’

‘You’re regulated by the relationship of trust you as a blogger have with your readers,’ says Dale. ‘If I misjudge something, or make a mistake, then my readers expect an apology and a correction, they will hold me to account.’ Self-regulation certainly seems like a more realistic approach, ‘as soon as trust is gone, your readers are gone,’ argues Dale, ‘you’re only as good as your last post’.

Another area where new media has the potential to be good for the democratic process is citizen journalism. If journalists are the eyes and ears of the public, then surely it can only be beneficial to have as many eyes and ears out in the world as possible. Local people can get out and report locally, or even hyper-locally, then share their findings on MPs’ individual campaigns and views. This is especially important in the British parliamentary system, where voters elect a single MP rather than voting directly for a presidential candidate as is the case in the USA.

The changes to journalism in recent times have seen falling revenues for traditional media outlets causing budget cuts, which in practice means fewer journalists on the job covering the local beat. As liberal Democrat blogger Mark Pack pointed out in a recent talk, there is a gap in the coverage of politics at local level, which leaves space for new forms of media. This gap is already being filled in some areas by citizen journalists who are holding those in power to account through blogs and tweets and, in so doing, providing a valuable public service and, in principle, aiding the democratic process.

'The danger with this', says David Kett, 'is unseen, undeclared and sometimes even unwitting bias. If you buy a Murdoch paper, or watch an online TV channel owned by News International, you know what you're getting: the bias is declared,' he says, and given the Sun's headlines, it's hard to argue with that. 'With the anonymity offered by the internet, that knowledge is gone,' says Kett.

Taking the potential threat from online anonymity one step further, is the niggling possibility that spin doctors and PR companies, operating on behalf of political parties will go 'under cover' by setting up unofficial blogs, Twitter and other social media accounts, posing as individuals. The chances of infiltration tactics being used to catch the public off guard are 'highly likely' says Iain Dale. The Parties will not hesitate to use friendly bloggers, Twitter users and so on, to spread rumours and make allegations which they don't want to be directly associated with. Smeargate, where Labour attempted to counter the right's perceived lead in the blogosphere, by creating the Red Rag site to spread anti-Tory gossip, would be a case in point, although it also proved the strategy was not fool proof, as Derek Draper and Damian McBride found out to their cost.

'This election will be one of the dirtiest yet,' says Iain Dale - something which Kett and Cole agree on. Mudslinging, smears and character attacks will all be ramped up a notch, fuelled not only by the relative protection afforded by anonymity online, but also by the deep financial crisis which still grips much of the UK, they predict. But while Dale feels dirty campaigning 'won't have much effect,' David Kett disagrees, 'if hurling abuse becomes a feature of the election,' he says 'it will put voters off... make them even more disillusioned than they already are.'

If that were the case, it would be a crying shame. New media has great potential to spread enthusiasm for the election, as was seen with the Obama campaign in the US. However, it would be wrong to attribute Obama's victory solely to the clever use of social networking. His online campaign fed perfectly into a more traditional one. As an editorial in the Guardian recently noted, 'the overlooked lesson of Obama's campaign is that it treated voters as citizens with active roles in a democratic society, rather than passive consumers swayed by party marketing,' this distinction between citizens and consumers is key. The way in which new media can best aid the democratic process is by recognising the fundamental role voters have to play and empowering them to get involved. This is the only way to shake off the stifling apathy which is a greater threat to democracy than the internet.