

JANUARY 2010

**SOCIAL
MEDIA**

DAVID BOWDEN



DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“SOCIAL MEDIA AND
THE INTERNET ARE
REJUVENATING
POLITICS”**

CONTENTS

Introduction

Key terms

The social media debate in context

Essential reading

Backgrounders

In the news

KEY TERMS

Blogosphere

Microblogging

Social media

Twitter

INTRODUCTION

1 of 7

NOTES

1 Few politicians have faced public humiliation over their favourite
1 biscuit, but Gordon Brown’s interview on the Mumsnet website
2 highlighted the growing role of new media in setting the
4 political agenda [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. Regardless of the truth of
5 ‘Biscuitgate’ [Ref: [First Post](#)], David Cameron was quick to exploit
6 the opportunity, announcing that the Conservatives would use
such sites as part of governmental policy [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Many
argue, however, that the growing numbers using the internet to
voice their opinions, produce citizen journalism or spearhead
campaigns has much greater potential than political rivals scoring
points off each other. In 2009 the micro-blogging site Twitter
became famous for its role in reporting on the Mumbai terrorist
attacks, documenting political oppression during the Iranian
elections, and exposing attempts to curb free speech during
the Trafigura case in the UK [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. At a time when
public faith in politicians is at a low [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)], the
success of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in the US [Ref:
[webinknow.com](#)] and former deputy PM John Prescott’s online
reinvention [Ref: [Guardian](#)] suggest that use of the blogosphere
is the best way for politicians to engage the public with the
political sphere, discuss policy and restore faith in mainstream
politics [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. Critics, however, point out that
the blogosphere is an unaccountable medium which gives voice
to angry and populist sentiments which have no place in politics
[Ref: [Financial Times](#)]. Does politicians’ use of social media offer
a positive way to engage an apathetic public, or is it a distraction
from developing a more coherent and inspiring political vision?



The Fifth Estate?

Before the summer of 2009 Iran was widely regarded as one of the most secretive democracies in the world. But the protests following the alleged corruption of the elections became widely publicized as Iranian citizens were able to report directly on events as they happened using sites like Twitter and Facebook, without being filtered or censored by the state or mainstream press [Ref: [Financial Times](#)]. In the UK, an attempt to ban reporting of parliamentary questions on the investigation of Trafigura was publicised widely in the unregulated and instantaneous world of the blogosphere, causing law firm Carter Ruck to back down and provoking fierce debate on UK libel law [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Shortly afterwards many of the same Twitter users led protests against journalist Jan Moir for a controversial article on the death of singer Stephen Gateley [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Famous Tweeter Stephen Fry argued that social networks were ‘a new and potent force in democracy’ [Ref: [stephenfry.com](#)]. But others have voiced reservations [Ref: [Guardian](#)], pointing out that the anonymity of the web allowed those with vested interests to distort reports of the Iranian elections [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)], and that many of the ‘Twitterati’ are part of the same liberal media elite they claim to challenge.

‘Smeargate’ and the politics of spin

For many, the ‘Smeargate’ scandal is a textbook example of politicians’ use of the web. The scandal centred on Gordon Brown’s then ‘spin doctor’, Damian McBride, conspiring to publish ‘smear’ attacks about Conservative ministers (and their families) on Derek Draper’s apparently independent and anonymous blog [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Bloggers such as Guido

Fawkes claimed McBride’s subsequent resignation as a victory for the blogosphere over the spin-obsessed mainstream press [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Some say bloggers’ irreverence and lack of regulation is exactly the kind of opposition needed to counter the spin doctors, in the same way satirical magazines such as Private Eye challenged the Establishment in earlier times [Ref: [Guardian comment is free](#)]. But some would counter that those publications had editorial control and journalistic standards, which offer checks and balances not available to self-publishers. One editor of an online magazine observed that the affair was more an expression of political exhaustion within the elites, and the blogosphere is a natural extension of the cynical, anti-political mood fuelled by the mainstream media [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Does the openness of the blogosphere bring more engagement by those outside the political elite, or does its use as another vehicle for smears and rumours exacerbate anti-political trends?

Mass innovation or unruly mob?

Much is made of the democratising impact of the blogosphere in allowing voters more of a say in how they are governed. Debate has been provoked by Charles Leadbeater’s conception of ‘We-Think’ [Ref: [Open Democracy](#)] which argues that internet resources such as Wikipedia give credence to the wisdom of crowds, and that innovation and participation in policy and governance is best encouraged by individuals working together rather than imposed from above. But, argues Nick Cohen, the shallow and impersonal nature of the internet creates an atmosphere of angry, populist reaction, which soon fizzles out and is no substitute for real world political engagement [Ref: [Guardian comment is free](#)]. Moreover, some observe that



THE SOCIAL MEDIA DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 7

NOTES

politics is about individuals fighting over what is best for the collective, and that 'We-Think' is dangerously close to 'group-think' [Ref: [spiked](#)]. What we really need, it is suggested, is a return to a public sphere in which we can have this frank political contestation, rather than a 'cultish interactivity' ruled by individual opinion and single-issue groups [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Yet in a political sphere dominated by party systems, think-tanks and corporate interests, Tim Montgomerie thinks the internet is still the best hope for political revolution because it directly involves the people [Ref: [Spectator](#)].



ESSENTIAL READING

The power of tweets

Jon Henley *Guardian* 31 October 2009

Poles, Politeness and Politics in an age of Twitter

Stephen Fry *stephenfry.com* 19 October 2009

Twitter ripped the veil off 'the other' – and we saw ourselves

Andrew Sullivan *The Times* 21 June 2009

How Labour's assault on the blogosphere backfired

Andrew Grice and Nigel Morris *Independent* 13 April 2009

FOR

When will MPs connect with bloggers?

John Ward *Guardian comment is free* 5 October 2009

John Prescott 2.0 has a new lease of life and a lot more followers

Michael White *Guardian* 24 August 2009

Why did so few stand up to the spin machine?

Guido Fawkes *The Times* 17 April 2009

The next general election will be won and lost on the internet

Tim Montgomerie *Spectator* 6 June 2007

AGAINST

Beware the instant anger of the HobNob mob

Nick Cohen *Guardian comment is free* 1 November 2009

Today's cultish interactivity is a poor substitute for a proper public sphere

Joe Moran *Guardian comment is free* 2 September 200

4 of 7

NOTES

Social media and the internet do not spread democracy

Andrew Keen *Daily Telegraph* 18 August 2009

'Smeargate' and the suicide of the elite

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 16 April 2009

IN DEPTH

Guido Fawkes: the blogger who knows the power of gossip

Andy Beckett *Guardian* 4 November 2009

A radical re-think of what 'change' is

Martyn Perks *spiked* 29 August 2008

Democracy in a network age: time to WeThink

Charles Leadbeater *openDemocracy* 5 March 2008

Ian Hislop: My 20 years at the Eye

Ciar Byrne *Independent* 23 October 2006



BACKGROUNDERS

5 of 7

NOTES

The Rise of Populism in Europe: we the people or them the mob? (audio)

Battle of Ideas 31 October 2009

Bloggers debate role of new media in politics at second 'Twinge' event

PR Week 6 October 2009

MPs discuss impact of Twitter during Labour 'Twinge' event

PR Week 29 September 2009

Libertas puts internet opportunities to use

Caroline Jungsand *EU Observer* 12 May 2009

Post-Election Voter Engagement

Aaron Smith *Pew Internet & American Life Survey* 30 December 2008

The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008

Aaron Smith *Pew Internet & American Life Survey* 30 December 2008

Text of Hazel Blears' speech to Hansard Society on political engagement

The Wardman *Wire* 6 November 2008

Campaign.USA

Jose Antonio Vargas *Washington Post* 1 April 2008

Campaigning on the Blogs

Perry Bacon Jr *TIME* 8 May 2006

A crazy British plot to swing Ohio to Kerry – and how it backfired

Andy Bowers *Slate* 4 November 2004

How the Internet Invented Howard Dean

Gary Wolf *Wired* January 2004

How the Obama campaign worked with bloggers

David Meerman Scott *Web Ink Now*

Telegraph blogs

Free Speech: The New Statesman blogs

spiked

Coffee House: The Spectator Blog

Times Online Comment Central

Guardian Comment is free

LabourList

Liberal Conspiracy

John Prescott's blog

Political Betting

Iain Dale's Diary

ConservativeHome

Guido Fawkes' blog...of plots, rumours and conspiracy



SOCIAL MEDIA:

“Social media and the internet are rejuvenating politics”



© ACADEMY OF IDEAS LTD 2010

DEBATING MATTERS
WWW.DEBATINGMATTERS.COM

IN THE NEWS

Social media could 'transform public services'

BBC News 27 November 2009

Cameron: Tory government would promote Mumsnet

Guardian 20 November 2009

Twitter: Obama admits he's never Tweeted, fingers 'too clumsy'

Huffington Post 16 November 2009

Twitter users: young, metropolitan and angry about civil liberties

Guardian 16 November 2009

Fry ponders leaving Twitter site

BBC News 31 October 2009

Brown's Biscuitgate: at last, a crumb of truth

First Post 28 October 2009

Gordon Brown gets a dunking in the great biscuit debate

Daily Mail 19 October 2009

Facebook closes fake accounts used by cybercriminals

Daily Telegraph 10 October 2009

Ben Bradshaw's 'callous' twitter attack on David Cameron condemned

Daily Telegraph 10 October 2009

Sarah Brown becomes Britain's highest profile Twitter user

Guardian 25 September 2009

Vogue model Liskula Cohen wins right to unmask offensive blogger

The Times 19 August 2009

Labour appoints Kerry McCarthy as "Twitter chief" in election run-up

The Times 19 August 2009

6 of 7

NOTES

Graham Linehan's 'We Love NHS' campaign shows political power of Twitter

First Post 14 August 2009

MPs expenses scandal won't be forgotten by voters

Daily Telegraph 30 May 2009

Government posts priorities on Twitter

Daily Telegraph 30 May 2009

Apology to MP over 'insult row'

BBC News 18 May 2009

Gordon Brown aide Damian McBride resigns over 'smear campaign' emails

Financial Times (free registration required) 11 April 2009

Blogs that spin a web of deception

Financial Times (free registration required) 12 February 2009



ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

FIND OUT MORE

Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

Debating Matters Competition
Academy of Ideas Ltd
Signet House
49-51 Farringdon Road
London
EC1M 3JP

- Yes, I'd like to know more. Please send me further information about the Debating Matters Competition:
- I am a teacher and would like further details about events in my area and how to enter a team
- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

First name

Surname

School/company/
organisation

Professional role
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone

**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

