



ippr Seminar Summary: "Is Online Community a Policy Tool?"

ippr Manifesto for a Digital Britain

"Is Online Community a Policy Tool?"

ippr, Friday 26th November 2004, 15:00 – 17:00



ippr Seminar Summary: "Is Online Community a Policy Tool?"

Is Online Community a Policy Tool?

3pm-5pm, Friday 26th November
ippr, 30-32 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7RA

Agenda

- 15:00 Chair's welcome & overview of the issues
- 15:15 Tom Steinberg, Founder, mySociety
- 15:25 Wingham Rowan, Founder, Guaranteed Electronic Markets
- 15:35 Chris Batt, Chief Executive, Museum Libraries and Archives Council
- 15:45 Discussion opened to the floor
- 17:00 Close and Vote of Thanks



ippr Seminar Summary: "Is Online Community a Policy Tool?"

Background

Extended uptake of the internet leads to greater and greater social uses for it. Success stories such as eBay and introduction services demonstrate that online contact needn't only be within 'virtual communities', but can create tangible real world benefits. But could these models be used as public policy tools, for strengthening communities and bolstering civil society?

This ippr event looked at a number of models in which the internet is used to strengthen offline community, and discussed whether there is a role for Government at all.

Chris Batt, CEO of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council, presented the MLA's plans for a 'knowledge web'; **Wingham Rowan** presented his policy proposal for 'People's Markets', **Tom Steinberg** outlined some of the [mySociety](#) projects. **William Davies** chaired the event.

Biographies

Chris Batt OBE

Chris Batt is Chief Executive of The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). MLA is the Government's development agency for the sector and is responsible for leading strategic advice on the delivery of services to users, opening up access to the collections held in museums, libraries and archives.

Previously Chris advised on the use of information and communication technologies in museums, archives and libraries, and led the Government's People's Network programme. Until August 1999 Chris was Director of Leisure Services for the London Borough of Croydon where his responsibilities included libraries, museums and heritage, the arts, sport and recreation, parks and open spaces, and tourism.

Chris has a keen interest in the development of information technology for public use. He lectures on this in many countries around the world and has written many books and papers.

Will Davies

Will Davies is a Senior Research Fellow on the Digital Society programme at the Institute for Public Policy Research. Previously, he worked on The Work Foundation's iSociety project, where his research focused on the relationship between communities and new media. He is the author of two iSociety reports *You Don't Know Me, But...: Social Capital & Social Software* looking at new uses of the internet in supporting social networks, and *Proxicomunication: ICT and the Local Public Realm* exploring uses of ICT in sustaining local communities.

Wingham Rowan

From television to online markets. Wingham began his career as a messenger at Yorkshire Television, rising to become an on-screen reporter. Aged 21 he started fronting his own networked series for children on ITV: "Rowan's Report". Behind the scenes he produced David Frost specials, international transmissions, The Big Breakfast and news coverage. In 1995 he approached the ITV network centre with the concept of a weekly programme about the emerging phenomenon of the Internet. The resulting series, cyber.cafe, when he produced and presented became the UK's longest running TV show about the Internet. His

ippr Seminar Summary: "Is Online Community a Policy Tool?"

commitment to the idea of e-markets to empower the smallest sellers evolved during that period.

Tom Steinberg

Tom is the director of mySociety, a project building sites which deliver simple, tangible offline social benefits. He's also a former policy analyst at the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit.

The Presentations

Will Davies presented his paper, '*Is Online Community a Policy Tool?*' which looks at whether government may have a role to play in enabling decentralised social uses of the net, and whether online public spaces could benefit from formal regulation. His presentation is available [here](#).

Following this, **Tom Steinberg** outlined the threats and opportunities that faced government with the increased popularity of online communities.

On the positive side, government has great gains to make in employing tactics used to create communities or networks which enable knowledge sharing, and the ability of a person to find the right 'expert' to talk to at short notice. Such tools have been around for some time, particularly in the form of discussion forums, and could be useful deployed in some areas of government – particularly the Inland Revenue and tax returns for example.

Tom identified the importance of social capital and how a lack of a sense of community may be responsible for many social ills, whereas highly connected communities are often identified as places one may wish to live.

While there has been government funding to recreate connected communities online, much of it has been undertaken in small 'pilot' areas, rather than rolled out nationally. The use of tools employed by online community organisations have not been seen excessive experimentation within the public sector, although there have been attempts within both the private and voluntary sectors.

One of the threats Tom identified was a lack of understanding and enthusiasm amongst government. He also outlined a danger between a clash of communities of place with communities of interest. Government institutions are typically based on geographical criteria, where there are extensively networked communities which cross boundaries; assumptions made by the Government may be challenged by a community of interests.

Wingham Rowan presented his policy proposal for National Electronic Markets, stating that government should have a role in creating such a national infrastructure just as they did with roads and waterways. His presentation can be viewed [here](#).

Finally, Chris Batt outlined the Museum Libraries and Archives Council's proposal for a 'Knowledge Web' which sought to enable people to find digital educational information from museums, libraries and archives through an online search portal. His presentation can be viewed [here](#).

The discussion

The impact of Google

ippr Seminar Summary: "Is Online Community a Policy Tool?"

It was acknowledged that a major starting place for journeys on the World Wide Web is the search engine 'Google'. In reference to the 'knowledge web', there was concern that the MLA shouldn't seek to reinvent the wheel. Rather they should concentrate their efforts on making their pages more searchable such that Google would return the answers offered by MLA. This was particularly important given that many people perceived there would be many future google innovations – Scholar.Google having been launched recently – to come.

National Electronic Markets

There was discussion as to why Government should get involved to produce such a system now. It is still early days in the realm of two way network activity in social spaces and some people felt the market may yet provide a solution to the problem Wingham Rowan had identified without the need for Government intervention.

Wingham strongly contested this, saying that one should not assume what had happened before in the case of eBay would happen again. There were particular circumstances at play when eBay came about which made this scenario unlikely.

It was agreed that there is an important question of timing in relation to government intervention which should be considered carefully before such a system is implemented.

There was also concern that major players would learn how to 'game' the NEM model and thus it would move quickly from its ideal of lots of small players offering services to another tool providing sales for corporations. In particular there may be scope for corporations to employ unfair competitive practices to warp the model.

This may also cause difficulties in the sale of services that are not location based. In this situation, the lowest price is the one that matters. The online is global thus countries with cheaper production costs and wages are likely to provide goods more attractive to the consumer.

Again, Wingham disagreed with this saying it doesn't automatically follow that the online is global. The National Electronic Market system is national and only UK offerings could be included.

The National Electronic Market model was offered as selling 'hours', or people's time, rather than goods, offered by eBay. There was some questioning as to whether hours could be sold in the same way, and using largely the same model as eBay. Selling time is a negotiation and you can't package hours in an open market in the same manner or package that a full time job offers, i.e. with benefits, holidays etc.

Trust and information

There was some debate about how we create trust online, and challenge the implicit assumption that larger organisations have more legitimacy. There is a problem for government in getting information to people in a form they can trust, which is not necessarily through a government portal.

There is a particular issue with iCan, with many people assuming they put a comment or complaint on the website then something will automatically happen. They don't realise



ippr Seminar Summary: "Is Online Community a Policy Tool?"

they have to do the extra work. It is difficult to know how best to assist the public in navigating the civic sphere. On most occasions, information is more trustworthy when it doesn't come from government however most content in these areas is created by government.

Attendee List

Chris Batt OBE	Chief Executive, MLA
Alex Bax	Senior Policy Officer, GLA
Patrick Bossert	Principal Strategist, Atos Origin
Lee Bryant	Headshift
Mike Butcher	mbites
Tom Coates	Plasticbag.org
Kathryn Corrick	Online Manager, New Statesman
Anne Diack	Director, Innovation Unit, DfES
Dan Dixon	BBC
Dr Rebecca Ellis	Chimera, University of Essex
Louise Ferguson	Director, Digital Habitats
Gerry Gavigan	Agents Programme, Inland Revenue
Anna Haywood	Chimera, University of Essex
Paul Hilder	Nildram
Milica Howell	eDemocracy Programme Manager, Hansard Society
Ian Johnson	Assistant Director, eDemocracy, eGovernment Unit, Cabinet Office
Giles Lane	Proboscis
Tim Levell	Editor, iCan, BBC
High Look	Rightscom Limited
Tom Loosemore	BBC
Dr Paul Miller	Director, Common Information Network
Miranda Mowbray	HP Labs
Giovanni Navarria	PHD Student, Digital Democracy, Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster
Kate Oakley	Independent Consultant
Nick Penston	Cisco
Mary Pitteway	Market Strategy Manager, Local Government, Steria
Wingham Rowan	
Omar Salem	Institute for Community Studies
Jill Sanders	Volunteer, South West London Online Communities
Richard Sargeant	Private Secretary, Minister without Portfolio
Alison Scowen	Head of Public Affairs, eBay
Nichola Sharpe	Corporate PR Manager, eBay
Tom Steinberg	Director, mySociety
Vin Sumner	Managing Director, Clicks and Links Ltd
Paula Sussex	Head of Government Relations, Atos Origin
Damian Tambini	Head, PCLMP
Lorraine Trenchard	Connected Communities Programme Manager, National local e-democracy Project
David Wilcox	Partnerships Online
Emma Wilson	Their Past Your Future Project Manager, MLA