



ippr Seminar Summary: "From Grass Roots to Networks: the role of social capital in political participation"

**ippr Manifesto for a Digital Britain**

**"From Grass Roots to Networks: the role of social capital  
in political participation"**

**Thatcher Room, Portcullis House**

**Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> November 2004, 17:00 – 19:00**



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## **From Grass Roots to Networks: the role of social capital in increasing political participation**

**Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> November, 17.00 – 19.00**  
**Thatcher Room, Portcullis House, Westminster**

### **Agenda**

- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| 17:05 | Chair's welcome & intro   |
| 17:15 | <b>Professor Stephen Coleman, Oxford Internet Institute</b> – <i>the Network- Empowered Citizen</i> |
| 17:35 | <b>Richard Allan MP</b> – <i>the politician's perspective</i>                                       |
| 17.55 | <b>Sally Russell, NetMums</b> – <i>the grass roots</i>  |
| 18.15 | Questions from the floor  |
| 18:55 | Close and vote of thanks  |

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## Background

A decline in democratic participation has coincided with extended uptake of the Internet. Governments have been keen to utilise the capabilities of new technologies in order to reverse this decline by pushing Government services online, however, the most successful examples of local participation have come from community web initiatives such as the BBC's iCan, UK Villages and NetMums.

This event, held as part of the Manifesto for a Digital Britain project, examined the potential of social capital in increasing political participation at a local level. Professor Stephen Coleman, Oxford Internet Institute, presented his paper detailing several case studies and exploring their importance in the public participation debate.

Speakers included:

Richard Allan MP, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for IT  
Professor Stephen Coleman, Oxford Internet Institute  
Sally Russell, NetMums

## The presentations

**Professor Stephen Coleman** introduced his paper, the network empowered citizen, in which he chose 6 different civic networks to detail. While each network covers a different sector of society, there are important similarities in that each relies on the Internet and provides a civic need.

Undertaking the research, the networks were asked three questions:

- Why an online network?
- What has been achieved?
- Where is it all leading?

The paper identified two main consequences, one political and one constitutional.

The political consequence centred on two different notions of citizenship: one being of a liberal autonomous citizen who, when they become an e-citizen, goes online to satisfy individualist purposes and to pursue economic rather than social ends.

The second is a notion of virtual communitarianism where there is a vision of online community in which the participants understand each other in a way which wouldn't be possible offline. Virtual communities in this sense are thought to provide "bonding" social capital.

But there is also the opportunity to suggest an in between kind of citizenship where individuals leading different lives need to talk to many different groups of people in order to access cumulative knowledge. In this instance the online network gives "bridging" social capital which is ephemeral and loose, but useful.

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Still this could be blighted by inequalities of the internet and power to use such "bridging" social capital to achieve ones own ends. If this challenge is not met, an already advantaged community / sector of society will become more so which may lead to exclusive political articulation.

The second consequence concerned governance. Often government is challenged to bring people closer to it but Stephen denied this was the right approach, instead, he said, Governments should be 'going out' to small and large networks to tap into the 'buzz' of online civic discourse.

In order to be able to do this, they may need to have a kind of public space in which everyone can trust each other. This could not be a Government space, as issues of trust would remain, but nor is it the job of civic networks to organise online consultations. Professor Stephen Coleman's proposal is for an online 'civic commons' which should be publicly funded and independent, much like the BBC Is for broadcasting, but which allows Government to talk to networks in a horizontal way.

**Richard Allan MP** then presented the politician's point of view. He said that the network empowered citizens Stephen Coleman had identified could cause a great deal of fear in politicians as they point to fundamental changes in the way elected representatives work. The general features of civic networks, in that they are non-geographical, non-hierarchical, and highly responsive and information rich challenge the existing case for monopoly of elected representatives who make 'better' decisions.

Elected representatives have to evolve in order to survive in the new environment. Parliamentary protocol means that MPs only deal with constituents although there have always been networks acting on MPs, trying to get their point across, such as trade bodies and unions. However the internet has allowed for new groups with a broad reach that can achieve critical mass very quickly. This has produced competition between traditional and new networks. Elected representatives need votes from citizens who are members of newer networks but traditionally respect the trade unions and other 'official' organisations.

Richard Allan outlined three responses elected representatives could have to constrain the impact of new civic networks, ranging from active resistance to co-option to their own partisan interests. In reality, he felt it was important to develop a model of co-existence.

He supported Stephen Coleman's civic commons idea but felt that it should be a mechanism that allows co-existence, rather than a space. A mechanism would allow existing expertise of networks to be brought into the political process rather than creating a new, potentially unused, space for these needs.

**Sally Russell** from NetMums then provided the view from the 'grass roots' as the founder of a web based organisation which aims to draw together experience from a specific community, in this case mothers with young children, and make it available to all. Her presentation is available [here](#).

The NetMums site is interactive in that parents can review groups they go to and link to people they want to meet in real life for example. It is constantly changing so people return to it regularly in order to read new information. The site is not just used by mothers from high income households, 16% who use the site have an income of less than £15,000 a year.

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Sally outlined the frustrations such networks experience in trying to get Government funding or to get the government to recognise them as an information source or gateway to a community. She identified two Government policies which could have been greatly assisted by NetMums: the site could be used to make mothers more aware of services such as learn direct, and also to raise awareness of domestic violence issues.

She also said there was a recurring problem of government trying to re-invent the wheel and to make alternative websites rather than find where the parents are and take the information to them.

## **The discussion**

### *The Role of Government*

It was generally felt that Government should take better notice of what was happening in the new networks the Internet was creating and find ways to tap into the information and opinion that was available on them. Difficulties were raised in terms of departmental thinking, which may hinder some organisations' progress. This had been experienced by NetMums who found that many different Government departments were looking at similar issues such that none wanted to 'lead' on the issue.

Blockages were also identified between Ministers and their departmental civil servants who may feel that such civic networks are in some way intruding on their turf. The need for making a distinction between elected representatives and bureaucracies was emphasised, as MPs can react more fluidly to information and are also reliant on constituent votes, whereas bureaucracies are not.

The danger of Government co-option was discussed, particularly in terms of how this might affect participants' trust in the community. Questions were raised regarding whether government funding, and government use of the network as a channel for disseminating information may lead to the perception of government pressure and a breakdown in trust. Sally Russell identified the importance of writing in a language suitable and understood by the target audience, and how NetMums promotes a service rather than a particular message.

In general it was felt that governments should be more concerned with receiving messages from networked communities rather than using them as channels to get messages across. Richard Allan urged that government should treat such communities with a degree of political respect, rather than approaching them on a single issue.

In order that such issues are properly considered in government, Stephen Coleman identified the need for a Minister for Participation, which was originally proposed some years ago by the Public Administration Committee. Sweden has a Minister for Democracy which fulfils exactly this role.

### *Best and Worst Practice*

Asked to identify examples of good practice overseas, Stephen Coleman identified Brazil who's Government undertakes consultations via the Internet regarding budgets and

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planning regulations for example. This has had a major effect on the way the Brazilian democracy has developed. He also identified Victoria and Queensland in Australia as examples of good neighbourhood governance.

Many people identified areas of bad practice, with local authorities developing websites which mirrored the service provided by online communities but without the dynamism or stakeholder input which made such networks successful. To a certain extent it was felt that e-Government targets and a 'tick the box' mentality were to blame for this.

### *Funding*

The difficulties of funding online community networks were discussed. Since many of the members of a network are volunteers, they don't have the capacity to volunteer at a formal level, nor commit a great deal of time a week to attend meetings etc. In many cases this greatly impacts whether a community's voice is heard.

Richard Allan identified the need for public sector venture capitalism. He stated that in the public sector there is a tendency to focus on the failed projects which is not the case in the private sector. To a certain extent this would impact on the desire for risk taking and innovative policy approaches in public sector bodies.

### *Digital Divide*

There has been concern that networked communities can heighten inequalities as home internet access is centred in higher income groups who are more able to utilise skills to create and benefit from social capital. To date NetMums has not undertaken any detailed survey of how people access their website; however, the organisation does work closely with libraries and provides special access facilities for people without email addresses in these locations.

The need to consider accessibility issues was also raised particularly for health service delivery. This did not just mean website text size and so on, but also training for carers for example.

### *New vs. Old*

The threat new online community networks posed to traditional membership bodies was raised. Political parties in particular, traditionally viewed as the link between government and the people, were identified as being under threat. There was a real possibility that political parties will die out as serious mass organisations in the next 20 years. One of the reasons for this was that political parties are not engaging with the public. It was felt parties only wanted to transmit rather than listen and that e-campaigning activities only alienated people.

The difference between the new and old models was often identified in terms of commitment and time. An online community requires only viewing the site, or posting an item once a month and from the comfort of your own home. Traditional membership based organisations would often require attendance at meetings and a much more significant time commitment in order to participate. While BBC iCan is generally felt to be a useful tool for increasing participation, users of the site only view the webpages for an average of 15 minutes, once a month.

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### Attendee List

<b>Name</b>	<b>Company</b>
Alex Bax	Greater London Authority
Alisdair Mangham	Camden Council
Andrew Miller MP	
Andrew Stephens	Islington Council
Andy Schofield	Pinnacle PSG
Anne Diack	DfES
Barry Griffiths	The Hansard Society
Beccy Earnshaw	The Electoral Commission
Brian Jenkins MP	
Brian White MP	
Briony Greenhill	Demos
Catherine Howe	
Catherine Maxwell	Citizens Online
Celia Moore	IBM
Chris Haynes	ODPM
Chris Quigley	
Christine Megson	Community Action Network
Dan Wilson	Ebay
Daniel Wilson	Liberal Democrats
David Halpern	Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office
David Johnson	Doors, Sunday Times
David Stewart	Energis
Dr Liesbeth de Block	Institute for Education
Dr Simon Roberts	Ideas Bazaar
Dr Ute Navidi	
Ellen Helsper	LSE
Ellie Stoneley	UK Villages
Emily Robinson	New Local Government Network
Emma Aldridge	Age Concern England
Emma Soloman	
Fiona O'Brien	London Libraries Development Agency
Gerry Gavigan	Information Resources
Grace Kempster	British Council
Greg Power	
Harry Weber Brown	e-Government Unit, Cabinet Office
Holly Robertson	Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames
Ian Johnson	Cabinet Office
Jane Ratford	St Albans District and City Council
John Fisher	Citizens Online
John Harrison	Eidentity Ltd
Judith Hannah	English Nature
Julian Coles	BBC
Kate Oakley	
Kay Withers	ippr
Lasse Heidemann	OPM
Liz Parratt	



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Lucy Stone	ippr
Maria Bryson	Royal College of Nursing
Mark Wakefield	IBM
Matt Locke	BBC
Matthew Hill	DCMS
Michael Mulquin	ISCommunications
Michael Osborne	Fishburn Hedges
Michelle Walton	
Mike Astill	North Keveston LA
Mike Flood Page	Illumina Digital
Mike Hughes	BT
Milica Howell	Hansard Society
Nick Buckley	NOP World
Nick Hugh	BT
Nick Penston	Cisco
Nick Wood-Dow	Chelgate
Paula Graham	IT4Communities
Penny Farrar	OPM
Professor Phil Redmond	Mersey Television
Richard Allan MP	
Richard Collins	Open University
Richard Steel	London Borough of Newham
Robert Coffey	OPM
Robert Taylor	Cable and Wireless Centre for Public Communication Research, University of Bournemouth
Roman Gerodimos	
Sally Porter	North Keveston LA
Sally Russell	NetMums
Samantha Cole	ISPA
Sophie Garnham	BBC News
Stefan Magdalinski	
Professor Stephen Coleman	Oxford Internet Institutue
Stella Clarke	
Sureyya Cansoy	Intellect
Tim Levell	BBC iCan
Tom Loosemore	BBC
Victoria Gibbons	Hansard Society
Victoria Harkness	Camden Council
Vin Sumner	Clicks and Links
Will Davies	ippr
Yogesh Chauhan	BBC
Zoe Sujon	LSE
Mary Pitteway	Steria
David Prtichard	Steria
Louise Ferguson	Digital Habitats Ltd