

Politics: Web 2.0 conference welcome speech

Andrew Chadwick

April 17, 2008

On behalf of Royal Holloway, the Department of Politics and International Relations, and the New Political Communication Unit, I'd like to welcome you to the conference.

It's often said that when it comes to new technologies, we *overestimate* their impact in the short term but we *underestimate* their impact in the long term. The role of the internet in politics and society over the last decade is perhaps a perfect example of this aphorism.

When we issued the call for papers for this conference we had three very simple – no doubt deceptively simple - questions:

First: has there been a shift in political use of the internet and digital new media - a new web 2.0 politics based on participatory values?

Second: How do broader social, cultural, and economic shifts towards web 2.0 impact, if at all, on the contexts, the organizational structures, and the communication of politics and policy?

And finally: does web 2.0 hinder or help democratic citizenship?

For me personally, these will be the questions I carry around in my head over the next couple of days. I'm sure that you'll all provide illuminating – and very diverse – answers to these questions.

I'm constantly amazed at the growing diversity of work in the area of new communication technologies and politics. The New Political Communication Unit was established as a devolved research grouping of the Department of Politics and International Relations, and a broader network across the College, in order to examine this new terrain.

Whenever you add the word 'new' to the title of something, you always risk provoking cynicism, even ridicule. But we decided to risk it because we believe there are three fundamental ways in which the current era could be seen - hypothetically of course - as new:

First, as we are all acutely aware, there are new media and communication technologies, particularly the internet, but also global digital television, mobile technologies and their assorted media forms and practices. We live in an increasingly converged, but also an increasingly pluralistic, information and communication environment.

Second, there are new forms of political behaviour, new institutions and new policy challenges that shape - and are shaped by - the rapidly changing information and communication environment.

Finally, there is a whole range of new theoretical dilemmas, methodological concerns, technologies and techniques that arise from the need to effectively research these growing phenomena.

I'm sure that this conference will contribute to our understanding of these important areas.

We have a promising event before us over the next two days, with six distinguished keynotes, 120 papers organised into 41 panels, and over 180 participants drawn from more than 30 countries.

All of the conference sessions will be held in this building. Rooms not being used for panels will be left open throughout, if you wish to take some time out and – dare I say it - “network.”

Before handing over to my colleague, Ben O'Loughlin, who will be chairing the first keynote session featuring Robin Mansell and Helen Margetts, I'd like to say a few words of thanks.

This conference has been some nine months in the making and many people have been crucial in getting us to the delivery stage.

First, I would like to thank all of you, for sending in such interesting paper proposals, for agreeing to present what promise to be wonderful keynote talks, and for volunteering as panel chairs.

Believe me, we needed those panel chairs!

Second, I would like to thank my colleagues for their advice and assistance with the preparation and with the running of the event itself.

Third, thanks to our conference sponsors: the Faculty of History and Social Sciences Research Strategy Fund, Routledge Publishers, and Polity Press.

Fourth: thanks to the Royal Holloway Conference Office for running the background logistics.

And last, but by no means least, special thanks should go to Lisa Dacunha, our administrator, who has worked tirelessly to make sure that this event actually happened.

In 2006, *Time Magazine* famously proclaimed that it's Person of the Year was – simply - “You.”

By this it meant what we might call the ordinary online citizen-producer, so it said - “for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, and beating the pros at their own game.”

In that same spirit, I would like to end by saying that you are all the stars of this conference. It's your conference. I hope you enjoy it.