

POWERFUL CONNECTIONS

The rise of 'virtual communities' has changed the face of politics. But are MPs genuine about online engagement – or is it just more spin? By Martyn Perks

The Times restaurant critic Giles Coren recently experimented with Twitter, the phenomenally successful online social networking tool. He used it to review London's Criterion restaurant using his mobile phone. With Twitter, you can send individual messages or 'tweets' up to a maximum of 140 characters each. Starter, main course and dessert all followed. By the end of the meal Coren had sent 19 separate tweets.

The issue, however, wasn't the quality of the meal. Instead, as he ate, Coren became hooked on the thrill of engaging with other twitterers who were following his every tweet. The "live online reader response" he said, provided him with real-time feedback with "... my pomposities occasionally pricked, my misconceptions corrected, my general presence appreciated." Afterwards, in more sombre mood, writing in *The Times*, he proclaimed that Twitter "... is the future, I'm afraid".

Coren is not alone in his awakening. In a few weeks Coren amassed over 4,400 followers, but that's nothing compared to Twitter stalwarts such as actor Stephen Fry with 800,000 followers, or singer Lily Allen with 1.6 million. Even 10 Downing Street has over 1.4 million followers.

But Twitter's meteoric rise is also symbolic. It's no surprise that celebrities adore it. But others, including politicians, are keen advocates, too, charmed by having 'followers' reading whatever they

dare say in real-time. As Coren revealed, for the first time there actually is an audience!

Twitter, like so many other forms of online social networking including Facebook, YouTube and MySpace, provides a new kind of engagement. With communication and feedback happening in real-time, everything else seem boring. For politicians like Gordon Brown, who know our interest is waning, the rise of social networking is an experiment that they cannot afford to ignore. But will the proliferation of tools like Twitter rejuvenate our enthusiasm for politics or accentuate our disinterest?

The ubiquity of communications technology means that engaging with other people has never been easier. But while these networking opportunities are wonderful, they are a poor substitute for the kind of relationships people had in the past, whether it was through a local club, union, political party or church.

As far as politics goes, the accountability of political leaders to the grassroots was much stronger in the past. But for an increasingly isolated political establishment who appear to be in a perpetual state of crisis, the internet seems to provide them with a unique opportunity to resurrect interest.



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