

Hence, Gordon Brown said that, “[We] must take advantage of new technology to make sure we open up every route to participation – not as a substitute for debate, but to deepen and widen it.”

But with the MP expenses debacle, our disenchantment with politics runs deep. Election after election has shown that voter turnout is in sharp decline. And while mainstream parties appear more marginalised than ever, newer kinds of political engagement are also emerging – especially online – that are also putting pressure on mainstream politics.

### “The accountability of political leaders to the grass roots was much stronger in the past”

So while New Labour, for example, has dabbled with the internet for some while, it is unclear whether they have actually learned anything new from it. Furthermore, as if adding to our mistrust of them, in many cases there is little to suggest that the political establishment are genuine in wanting to engage with us properly online.

When Brown decided to try and respond to the out-of-control

expenses scandal by broadcasting an overly smiley, ‘chummy’ message on the online video-sharing website YouTube, it badly missed the mark. Only a paltry 4,000 viewers watched it – but it caused widespread derision in the media. Indeed, the mauling he received meant that the official Downing Street YouTube portal that hosted the video decided to turn off its comments feature – defeating the supposed point of the whole exercise.

But was Brown really trying to engage with a new audience? It is clear that the drive for social engagement and participation via internet technologies is driven by a political agenda, but one that seeks merely to secure participation in a technical sense, rather than in a more genuine sense of actively shaping the political future. This can backfire rather embarrassingly.

In 2006, Brown launched the E-Petitions website for anyone wanting to win support for any kind of appeal to government. The idea seemed like a good one at first. But soon afterwards, the main petition became a crusade against New Labour’s road pricing policy, attracting 1.8 million signatories. Today, the most popular petition on the Downing Street website is entitled ‘resign’, with over 70,000 signatories.

### “The Downing Street YouTube portal turned off its comments feature”

New Labour has now appointed a ‘Twitter Tsar’, MP Kerry McCarthy, to head up its media campaigns. But this is more about dealing with the government’s image crisis rather than wanting to engage in a political discussion with the public. McCarthy gave the game away when asked about her role. She said it was important that MPs began to build up their “online collateral” in the run up to the next election.

While it is plain to see that the political elite are not interested in engaging with us, others think that the internet could be useful. One prominent advocate, Tom Steinberg, the director of e-democracy project and charity, mySociety, and once a policy wonk inside Downing Street, thinks the internet’s role is to keep the government in check.

For example, Steinberg’s fixmystreet.com website enables anyone to report an issue to their local council. Issues might range from fixing broken lampposts to clearing up dog mess on the pavement. All well and good –

but it’s hardly inspiring stuff. If this is what is meant by engagement and participation, then perhaps it is no wonder we are more interested in matters beyond politics.

Time and again, the changing face of the internet has wrong-footed the political establishment, only emphasising its disconnection from the rest of us and highlighting its own exhausted agenda. While we are certainly more than able to communicate with political leaders, we either choose to ignore them or do so on our terms – often deriding them. The harder they try to engage with us, the more they seem to lack integrity.

The internet is full of big ideas, but the biggest test of all is whether any of them can cross over into our everyday lives. Until then, the need for an intelligent public space will remain. Instead of fetishising every new social networking phenomenon in a half-hearted and cynical manner, politicians would do better to make a genuine effort to engage with us in the real world. *Martyn Perks is a business consultant, and a regular writer and speaker on design and IT (www.martynperks.com). He is speaking at this year’s Battle of Ideas festival October 31 & November 1 at Royal College of Arts, London SW7 (www.battleofideas.org.uk)*

