Five reasons (at least) the Internet is good for politics

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A debate at Demos on whether the Internet is changing politics answered "Yes, but". With four very different speakers you got four different views.

Tom Watson MP was effusive and positive about the Internet as usual but what I like is that he recognises that any results will depend on political will, not technological facility.

John Lloyd was rather more sceptical – he calls himself a 'techno hater'. But in fact his evidence seemed to offer as much ground for optimism. Even in Russia, apparently, an intelligent independent blogosphere is starting to emerge.

We will hear more from the excellent Evgeny Morozov at Polis on January 12th – but suffice to say that he points out how those in power are at least as good at using the Net for negative ends, as dissidents are at using it for democratic purposes.

But most lucid on this night was the Conservatives Head of New Media [rather old fashioned title Rishi?] Rishi Saha.

He is a techno-realist but it is clear that he believes that the Internet offers exciting, if incremental democratic possibilities. He puts them in five categories [I think I have these about right]:

1. It reduces the barriers to getting involved in political activism and political media – either independently or through political parties

2. It enables political parties or movements to mobilise support (eg Barrack Obama) much more efficiently

3. It allows political parties and activists to start to escape from mainstream media agenda setting

4. It allows much quicker and more open reform of political parties themselves

5. It allows Government to open itself up to the public and so become more transparent and therefore, both more democratic and efficient

As Rishi said. The Internet is not an ideal place. But even if 95% of activity online is nonsense or commercial that still leaves an exciting 5% space where people do important and political things.

I think the message I took from this event was to stop worrying about the grand questions such as 'Is the Internet Good or Bad' and instead to say 'let's concentrate on the 5% and making that democratic space more effective and available both in the UK but also globally'.