People power online: leave it alone!

There has been an explosion of people power online and now the powers that be want to use it for their own ends. But can they influence internet use without distorting it? A discussion last night at 'participation' think-tank Involve was a depressing reminder of the number of people out there who don't really want to let go of their power. It was fine panel of people who all want the internet to serve noble aims. Nigel Dacre's IPTV channel promotes charities (among other things), Ros Taylor writes for that fine forum for opinion, the Guardian's Comment Is Free, and Tom Steinberg is the founder of the only political web site I know that actually gives useful information to the voter, Mysociety. But I confess, my sympathy was with Tory blogger and IPTV channel creator Iain Dale. He seemed to be

the only person in the room who appreciated that the whole point of the internet is that people use it because they want to. When people go to Youtube of Facebook to network, to learn or to discuss around anything remotely political it is because they want to. But last night's audience was full of people who are paid to *persuade* people to 'get involved' in politics. One of them was very upset when Mr Dale questioned that job as a good use of taxpayer's money. It was the one moment in the evening when real politics intruded – as opposed to the endless, circular discussion about process.

Ten years ago the (largely) young people in that room would have been discussing policy, or organising a political party or lobby group. Now they spend their time working out how best to 'involve' people in politics. Politics is very dull in the UK at the moment. It's what we all voted for. Peace and quiet and prosperity. It's not surprising no-one's interested. The internet offers people a wonderful way to communicate and interact. The presentation by Oswin Baker from Ipsos Mori at the beginning made that clear. He also pointed out that people are interacting in different ways. Some of those ways will be political. By all means let's foster New Media Literacy but if you want people to get political then sort out the politics and leave the people alone.�